



Nordic Integral

Searching for Integral Thinking in Sweden and Swedish Academia

An interview with Dr. Thomas Jordan

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1. Background and contact with Ken Wilber and the Integral Institute

ND: Thomas, could you briefly outline your academic background, your present work and describe your interest in the writings and work of Ken Wilber

TJ: I have a quite complicated past in coming to the field of academia. I started out studying economics and economic geography and I have written my doctoral dissertation in industrial geography. But at the same time I've been very much involved in international relations and also I've been studying psychology. I've spent several years in a psychodrama therapy group.

Reading Ken Wilber's *Up from Eden* along with Stanislav Grof's *Realms of the Human Unconsciousness* were very important to my own orientation. I suddenly discovered an alternative framework for interpreting what happens around us in the society and I got more and more interested in learning more about such perspectives for the purpose of trying to do some kind of research using perspectives for studying the structures of consciousness and psychological dynamics. After having written a quite lengthy study of the history of specialisation in the liquid pump industry I decided to reorient myself towards conflict research and I was very lucky because I got six year position as Research Fellow, where you're able to spend your time doing whatever you want! So I was able to spend a lot of time reading about adult development, psychology of values, and when I felt I had a reasonably good grasp of the theories I started to develop research projects using that kind of framework, about five years ago now. In the meantime I have carried out a number of research projects using various kinds of perspectives drawing on ego development, psychology and similar frameworks.

I work as a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Work Science at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. It is a cross-disciplinary department with researchers with different backgrounds including sociology, history, business administration and so on. I'm mostly involved in the courses on conflict resolution, which are offered up to master's level, which is unique I think in the whole of Scandinavia. These courses are focused on conflict management and conflict resolution and they are quite a lot orientated towards developing skills. We work with methods, a lot with communication and training mediation and of course diagnoses and that kind of thing. The spectrum of conflicts which are covered in these courses are from interpersonal and family conflicts, to neighbourhood and organisational conflicts, up to labour market conflicts. Not so much ethnic and international conflicts nowadays as our neighbouring department of Peace and Development Studies is more focused on that kind of scale. I have several colleagues in this department and they are partly involved in the courses in conflict resolution.

ND: What has been your involvement with the Integral Institute?

TJ: I don't know right now actually because when the Integral Institute (www.integralinstitute.org) was launched there was the idea of setting up ten or twelve different branches focusing on different topic matters and I happened to get involved in the politics branch. But since the endowments and various kinds of donations that looked like they were going to happen didn't happen and also maybe

because Ken Wilber found it wasn't that effective to work in this way, so it all petered out. He decided not to go on with this kind of structure, with branches with 30-40 people in each branch. So for the last two years or so I haven't heard anything directly from Ken Wilber. I only hear what everyone else hears, and that's not very much.



3. What do you feel distinguishes integral thinking?

ND: Could you outline your understanding of the key qualities that you feel distinguish integral thinking and developmental (evolutionary) psychology as developed by Ken Wilber, Robert Kegan, Clare Graves, Don Beck, Jane Loevinger, Jenny Wade, Susanne Cook-Greuter, Jean Gebser, Lawrence Kohlberg?

TJ: This is a difficult question to pose because you really have to look at and appreciate the different dimensions that involve a lot of detail. So if I give you an answer it will be what comes spontaneously and perhaps not very thought through. But never the less here it is. I feel that the central aspect of the cognitive part of the integral being or meaning-making is the ability to notice and understand the nature of perspective or meaning-making. To be able to see the characteristics of your own way of making sense of things and the differences between your own perspectives and the perspectives of other people. This ability, or skill, has very far-reaching implications for how you feel about people and groups who belong to other types of meaning-making and how you go about change things in the world, because the whole area of meaning-making becomes very central to your strategy for achieving solutions to social problems of various kinds. And that's not really the case before having developed this kind of meta-paradigmatic awareness. I'm quite critical of some of the stage models in adult development theory because I feel they try to fuse many different aspects of cognitive, emotional and conative development, which I feel, ends up confusing more than it actually explains. Many of those dimensions are linked to each other, but they are not linked in the way postulated by, for example, ego development theory. And I think we will see in the next ten to twenty years frameworks that will deconstruct those stage models into several different lines of development. There are already some efforts in that direction but they are not very systematic and they are not very integrated.



4. Why does the world need integral thinking?

ND: Why is this field of integral thinking and developmental psychology important as the world enters the 21st century?

TJ: I think that there are some very important problems that we face as a global society that cannot be handled by various kinds of mono-logical reasoning. We will not be able to build and retain civilised societies with a reasonable degree of human dignity without having some people who are able to look at problems with different kinds of frameworks and perspectives and who are able to bridge and integrate different outlooks on problems and different value systems. I don't think we will see some kind of Great Leap or something like that in the general population, but I think that maybe we might achieve a position where people who are working on strategic issues and planning on a societal scale will develop more of the skills necessary to do that. I think we see already see that happen even though people have never

heard about Spiral Dynamics, Beck, Wilber or others integral thinkers.

I think that globalisation makes it impossible to live in isolated islands of societies and communities. We get linked up with economic, cultural, social, and political structures, which means that we come into contact with different needs, different ways of making sense of what is happening and that will potentially generate some very destructive conflicts if we fail to create the frameworks that can hold those differences and contradictions and lead them into some kind of constructive transformative process.



5. How can we bring meaning and vision back into Swedish culture?

ND: How can we bring meaning and vision back into Swedish culture and Sweden's academic institutions?

TJ: I don't think we can, at least not in the sense of making a plan and implementing that plan. We can make some contributions in our specific areas of action, but I think that process will be quite chaotic and not following some kind of master plan in any way. I feel there are many positive things happening in many places – if you just learn how to recognise the signs of these positive things happening – but I think they happen in a very unordered way, so to speak. We are many people engaged in some kind of existential overarching set of values, as we try to find ways to work efficiently towards those values in our own specific environments and the circumstances are very different depending on where you actually are in the system.

I don't think there is a way to unify or create a common discourse or a common vision uniting very many people. I think we will have many different kinds of meaning-making communities working in various ways for somewhat similar directions, but I very much doubt that we will be able to establish a kind of common perspective or discourse even if it's a framework with a very large embrace, as the integral framework for example. The integral framework will be discarded and looked down upon even by people who have quite integral outlooks. The integral framework is itself a type of discourse and perspective which appeals to some people and not at all to other people.



6. What level of interest is there for adult development and integral thinking?

ND: What level of interest are academics and university students in Sweden showing for Integral thinking? And why do you feel this to be the case?

TJ: I think that 99.99% of the students in the universities in Sweden are not exposed to any explicit integral thinking, so it's hard to say. My students, studying courses in conflict resolution for example, are very interested when they get the chance to grapple with Bill Torbert's, or Robert Kegan's or similar frameworks. But they are a very small group among the students in general. I think it's difficult to make any kind of general comment. I know of very few people in Sweden who work in a dedicated way with adult development, ego development or consciousness development perspectives. I've tried to find them, but among senior researchers

I only have one or two names. I do know a few post-graduate students who are interested as well, but once again, they are very very few.

Mats Friberg, from the Department of Peace and Development Studies, which I mentioned earlier, was the one who actually introduced me to Ken Wilber in 1986. He has been familiar with these perspectives for a very long time and I know he also uses at least one book by Ken Wilber in post-graduate courses, in scientific methods and such things. But as far as I know he has not done any kind of empirical research in making uses of these perspectives. No one that I know of here at Gothenburg University, or in Sweden for that matter is using this work in a macro perspective, at least not in research. The other people at that department have not, at least not in any great extent, started using vision logic as a framework on which to base their research.



7. Using second tier frameworks without doing so explicitly.

ND: You commented recently that you knew of only a couple of other academics in Sweden who have anything to do with these second tier frameworks...

TJ: I wouldn't say that because I think it is very important to make a distinction between integral or second tier frameworks as explicit discourses, i.e. a perspective that uses that kind of terminology, and on the other hand research approaches and frameworks that are second tier in nature but don't call themselves by such names. I think that there are very many researchers who are perfectly able to reason using vision logical reasoning or who are themselves approaching their subject matter according to some kind of second tier reasoning but they don't explicitly use that kind of discourse. In fact my research project involves identifying such people working in governmental authorities.

ND: How does that kind of thinking express itself?

TJ: You find some individuals who are very keenly aware of different perspectives and frameworks, different types of meaning-making. They have a very flexible approach to gaining knowledge and solving problems and looking at them from different types of approaches and perspectives. They are very open to listening to other people and to people who have very different opinions and values than their own. They are generally pragmatic because they have a keen insight into the complexity of causes and consequences in the various kinds of spheres in the individuals, in cultures, in institutional structures, in legal structures and so on. And that means that they don't get too excited and involved in utopian visions or ideas but they look at the situation such as it is right now and look for openings or ways of pushing some kind of values forward in the ways that are possible at that particular time. And yet, I don't think there is a single one of those people who actually thinks in terms of these theoretical frameworks we are discussing. They have developed vision logic awareness in a more spontaneous way and are often not able to or interested in trying to capture in words what they are doing or how they are doing it, i.e. the level of their reasoning. I think this level of awareness that we are discussing is more of an academic thing to do and not really necessary for them. But personally, I think some of those people might perhaps find it useful to

more objectively be able to articulate their level of thinking using concepts and models which are more characteristic for their way of looking at things, because that might give them a more keen understanding of the resistance they are encountering when meeting other levels and meaning-making structures. I also found that the most sophisticated of those people know very well the kind of inertia and resistance this creates, i.e. how resistance is anchored both in individual and collective meaning-making structures.

ND: Have you noticed any shift in the sorts of problems they are working when they have developed this higher level of thinking?

TJ: I don't have that kind of overview for this particular group of people we are talking about. I'm still looking for people who are now starting to think this way, who use this level of thinking I call vision logic. I need to first identify who they are and to do interviews with a reasonable number of such people. I don't know how many people there are in Sweden, so I can't answer that question.

ND: From the ones you have interviewed what sort of problems are they working with?

TJ: Well for example, how to transform the organisational cultures in their own spheres of action towards a more open ended, a more learning approach to problems. They are often encountering very closed and lower levels of thinking together with a competitive attitude, in particular between organisations. They are quite weary from meeting that kind of limiting closed thinking and want to be able to look at problems from a super-ordinate perspective and to find the most appropriate solutions to those problems regardless of whether the problems transcend organisational boundaries or not. So I think that might be a very common concern for such people. How to develop action strategies for allowing a more flexible approach to problem solving by drawing on different perspectives, drawing on different resources, and different organisations and allowing for the transformation of the organisational structures themselves when they are no more appropriate for dealing with the new level of problems we are encountering in society.



8. The texture of Nordic Peace and the future of conflict resolution

ND: The Nordic countries are often associated with high levels of foreign aid, human rights, social democracy and peace initiatives. The Economist recently commented, "All five Nordic countries attach great importance to support for the United Nations, generous spending on foreign aid, peace keeping and peace-brokering".

We want to make the world a better place, not least of course to the conflicts in Israel, Palestine and in Iraq. But are our Nordic peace initiatives really working?

TJ: I think that this image of the Nordic countries that comes across in this article is not very accurate. Of course it's true that the Nordic countries spend a greater percent of their GNP on aid and development. But it's not true that the Nordic countries are very much involved in peace brokering or mediation. It's mainly at this

time the Norwegians. So I'm not sure there is that kind of approach to dealing with conflicts. I think that there are some aspects of the policies that are working though. I think that the analysts and the policy makers in the Nordic countries are quite advanced in terms of understanding the structure of the preconditions necessary for stable and peaceful societies, at least in terms of understanding the importance of the social and economical and political conditions that are necessary to support it. That kind of awareness is also present in the Netherlands, Germany and some other countries as well, but it's very thoroughly integrated in the policy making structures existing in the Nordic countries. And that means the Nordic countries are very much involved in developing conflict prevention approaches that stress the building of legal, political and social systems that do not generate high levels of conflict. And they do this in a very pragmatic way, for example by supporting the creation of institutional structures for surveying and implementing policies and guaranteeing human rights such as in the Baltic countries and in Russia as well as in creating policies and platforms for involving these and other countries in the European Union in, for example, environmental issues. So we see more and more economic, political and military interdependence. And I think that's a kind of policy that makes an impact in the long run. We are very good at analysing the Lower Right quadrant in Ken Wilber's four-quadrant system, the structural aspect of prevention and handling of problems, but we are not very good at the Lower Left quadrant, understanding the role of meaning-making and the processes leading up to meaning-making systems that play an active role in violent conflicts. And I think that a lot of things will happen in this area in the following decades, but the start is a bit slow.

ND: What would an AQAL approach to conflict resolution involve and how different would it be to the approaches currently used?

TJ: I have worked with conflict resolution for quite a number of years now. It was quite late in my acquaintance with the field of conflict resolution and the field of integral questions that I actually asked that kind of question. Because to me conflict resolution is not a system of engineering techniques, it's more like an art. The reason I use the metaphor of art for conflict resolution is that it must be contextually adapted to unique situations and that means you cannot have frameworks with boxes where you can identify "this is a conflict in that and that quadrant, and that and that level, and therefore you must use that and that method". It doesn't work that way. So I think an integral awareness – where you have a kind of sensibility for culture and individual meaning-making and behaviour as well as a sensibility also for the hierarchy of meaning-making structure will allow you to identify the unique aspects and the unique conditions and circumstances of each conflict and from there choose an intervention method or prevention method or preventive measure which is adapted to that particular situation. But I don't think we will be able to write a great textbook on integral conflict resolution. It will undoubtedly be done, but I don't know if there is so very much value in doing such a thing. You have to have good a grasp of many different techniques and methods and you have to be able to identify the patterns and the characteristics of the situation you work with. But it will still be a very unique and artful decision as to how to act in any particular given situation without this being a recipe book at all.



9. The next step in political and postmodern meaning-making

ND: How are we doing then politically in Sweden in being able to integrate political differences? For example, our different views about the USA and seeing the deeper codes behind this?

TJ: Of course there are people who regard the USA as the greatest threat to global peace and a force to be very much distrusted and having some kind of intentions to dominate the world scene. I'm not saying this is not true, I'm just describing the kind of perspective that is quite common in Sweden. On the other hand there are people who have a great trust in the USA as a kind of bulwark against destructive forces in the world and they tend to interpret particular events and facts in terms of that greater narrative. So I would say that the next step in our maturing as political "beings" is to recognise the nature of those narratives, to look at them, to compare them, to talk about them and the underlying structures behind them, and to look at what kinds of consequences come out of looking at the world through the lenses of those narratives. And I think that more and more people will develop the ability to see the underlying characteristics of those narratives. To compare them, to look at them and have more flexible relationship to their own and other peoples' narratives. And that is getting to the core of what I perceive as second tier awareness.

ND: And I guess with that a growing interest in different developmental theories and frameworks?

TJ: I think that will be reserved for people who have some kind of spontaneous interest in that particular field of study. Because I think that you can develop quite a lot of awareness and skill in understanding the nature of different meaning-making structures, even to have a kind of sense of perspective of more limiting or more comprehensive or more sophisticated, without actually adhering to a theory or model or discourse of cognitive development or vMEMES or something like that. I think that maybe we will see more interest in those kinds of models but I think most people who develop second tier awareness will not make use of the discourses developed in adult development frameworks.

ND: What kind of language or models will they be using to distinguish different levels of development?

TJ: I think that much of this awareness will not be explicitly captured in concepts and language, but the awareness will be there. People will recognise these patterns in meaning-making and they will talk about the characteristics of frameworks and perspectives but they will maybe not develop conceptions of stages and levels, or something like that. You can have some kind of awareness of more limiting or more sophisticated perspectives without having some kind of linear or hierarchical model with clearly delineated characteristic or qualities or stages and levels. This way of thinking is also very much more acceptable and appealing to people who like the postmodern pluralistic ideas because they are not so very keen on having rigid conceptual frameworks to put things into.

ND: Have you seen any example of this?

TJ: Yes. I did an interview with a police officer recently who has reflected a lot on the cultural meaning-making patterns within the police organisation. He can describe the patterns of reasoning that limit the way many of his colleagues and the organisation as such deals with problems. He can also see the ways in which certain meaning-making structures are more limited than his own. But I don't think that he would even be interested in diagnosing different ways of approaching problems in terms of cognitive stages. But I think he's keenly aware of that there are different qualities involved. And he is keenly aware of the need to understand those structures in order to navigate in that kind of environment. You have to understand how people conceive of particular problems in order to find ways to open up those meaning-making systems. And I think there are quite a lot of such people around, postmodern pluralists, who are not particularly interested in learning more about developmental psychology or cognitive development or things like that, but who have a very well developed practical skill in recognising differences in meaning-making. They make a lot of use of common knowledge about psychology in order to explain to themselves what is happening when people handle problems in quite unsophisticated and limiting ways.



10. Stratified Democracy

ND: What is your understanding of Stratified Democracy?

TJ: I have not completely understood what is actually meant when Don Beck talks about Stratified Democracy. I have been present a couple of times when he has talked about this. When I first encountered this concept I found it very interesting. I imagined this framework to be some kind of idea about how to organise a particular society with different kinds of institutional structures. But as far as I have seen of what Don Beck has produced or how he has elaborated this idea that's not really what he is doing. As far as I have understood, it is more a kind of awareness that people, or groups of people or communities who make sense of themselves or the world in different ways need different kinds of political structures in order to be sane and healthy. But, I believe it's a long way from that kind of understanding or insight to conceiving actual institutional structures in actual societies. I would say that many people who are involved in peace-keeping operations and conflict prevention policies have some kind of understanding that you cannot use a standard model of democracy in Afghanistan for example. You have to adapt the political structures to the kind of cultural, political, social and ethnographic situation that that particular society has right now. As I said I'm not at all sure that I have understood the idea of Stratified Democracy.

When I first heard about the concept I imagined it to be about how to have different layers and different structures in the same country, or society, or community, or integrating and adapting different meaning-making strata of communities within the same society. That would be a very nice thing. But I have no idea how it would look like in practice and where it would be practical and possible to do such a thing. To have a contingency model that says that you have to choose and build political structure differently in different countries is not that radical I think. But of course it's

important. There are people who will think that you can implement western democratic systems in Congo for example, which is not possible.

Another point is that an important part of leadership training is to develop sensibility for the different kinds of conditions and circumstances that different types of meaning-making present. And that they should have in their set of skills ways of leading and solving problems that can be chosen according to what kinds of groups and individuals you are dealing with. Different individuals and groups require different kinds of leadership and power structures and problem solving processes depending on what makes sense to them. But I think that's something that is quite difficult to institutionalise. To build or have a standard model or organisation which makes use of different structures. It's more a question of being a skilful leader who can choose according to the particular situation.



11. Searching for signs of second tier leadership in the Nordic region

ND: Do you see any signs of Integral thinking amongst our Nordic leaders?

TJ: I don't really have enough information to give a good answer. Though I would expect that the number of individuals and perhaps even of organisations that have a larger and larger proportion of second tier or integral meaning-making is gradually increasing. But it's also in the nature of that kind of leadership to act more behind the scenes than in founding a new political party.

ND: Will we see second tier within our political parties?

TJ: I don't think we will see it very much within our political parties because I think that the YELLOW or integral thinking people will rather choose to work within other kinds of organisations than in political parties. The present logic of the political system makes it very difficult to have that kind of openness to different perspectives and systems of interpretation that such people would like to draw on. The political system and the logic of the political system is such that you have to use a kind of adversarial logic. You have to stress the differences, you have to carve out positions and you have to confront the position of others as much as you can in order to gain support from the electorate and from the general audience. And if you are an integral individual you will probably not be very appealed by being draw into that system. There are exceptions to this but I think in general we will first find these new second tier leaders in authorities, in NGO's and also in commercial companies and organisations. Perhaps in organisations that span and integrate other organisations, like cooperative organisations and industry interest organisations.

One of my pet ideas is that the people who reason in this way will be the experts working with complex problems, working with strategies, working with planning, working with organisational development and transformation and so on, rather than being the front leaders as executive officers and presidents of organisations.



12. Evolutionary Enlightenment

ND: What is your understanding of Andrew Cohen's Evolutionary Enlightenment? How important is the spiritual line of development for furthering the evolution of the

autonomous self and the transformation of culture?

TJ: I'm not familiar with the details of Andrew Cohen's approach, but I have read some of his work. Also I'm far more influenced myself by Buddhist philosophy and psychology than the Vedic traditions. I think that what is going on, or at least what should be going on, is a kind of de-culturalisation of the Eastern wisdom traditions. We have to differentiate between the particular cultural heritages of those traditions, which are not really possible to transfer to another cultural context without getting awkward. There are very important things to learn and develop from those traditions, having to do with the transformation of the sense of self, expanding identification and to de-identify or disembodify from the mindless identification with urges, with wishing, with thinking, and so on. I think that we are seeing a large impact in some branches of western psychology from Buddhist and other Eastern traditions. If you look for example at the treatment methods for borderline personalities you see a lot more use of mindfulness techniques than you did twenty years ago. And I think that this kind of gaining of perspective and making visible the relationship between the self and consciousness with the actual contents of experience will be a major area of cultural societal learning in the time to come.

I have an article on one of my websites about self-awareness and meta-awareness (www.perspectus.se/tjordan) in Swedish as well as in English where I have tried to put some of those more spiritual insights into a language which is more accessible to people without them having previous exposure to eastern wisdom traditions and I have experienced a lot of people who are very interested in that kind of perspective. For example last week I met with a psychologist who is now working for the National Police College in Stockholm and is using that particular article in his lecturing for first year police students at the college. Over time I think such things will have an increasing impact on our knowledge about how we can relate to our own experiences. It will take a very long time of course and the impact will be very uneven in terms of individuals and in terms of organisations. However I think there is a historical process going on where this stuff gets more normal to talk about and to learn about in society.



13. Evolution

ND: *Would you put everything we have been speaking about into a personal, social, cultural and spiritual evolutionary context?*

TJ: I reflect on that from time to time. The postmodernists are very critical about our preoccupation with development or the modern societies' preoccupation about development and I think it's a good and necessary thing to do, to look at the reasons why we are so preoccupied with development and evolution and so on. It's a soothing idea, it's a kind of idea that can offer some kind of solace or meaning or direction in life and that kind of makes me a bit wary. So I wouldn't want to be too enamoured in the idea of development. I try to tell myself that maybe it's all a bit exaggerated, i.e. this so called evolutionary potential for development. Maybe the postmodernists are right, maybe there are no such clear developmental patterns, but instead a constantly changing and rather chaotic process of shifting circumstances that do not yield any kind of clear-cut and distinct developmental

patterns. So I try to caution myself about this, but of course I'm rather caught up in this developmental perspective. I look at what is going on in terms of some kind of general developmental model. But I wouldn't want to be too identified with such an outlook.

ND: If enough people in the Nordic countries were to assume an Integral awareness and a social responsibility for their privileged postmodern level of psychological and sociocultural development, what might that mean for human emergence and evolution?

TJ: I think that what is in the realm of the possible is that more and more individuals will become engaged in different kinds of societal activities, for example building an international court of justice, devising peace-keeping operations, furthering political and economical integration, and mediating in conflicts and so on. They might have a very important impact on the institutional structures that are built and the cultures that are getting embedded in those structures. So that might be very important on a global level as well. And I do think that such individuals might have a disproportionate role and impact on the world scene, but I don't think they will only come from the Nordic countries. There are such people in many different countries. And I also think they will increasingly build informal networks where they use each other for developing better solutions, better ideas, better strategies for creating more effective solutions to complex problems. But these are very messy, very chaotic processes that are hard to spot, I think, if you don't have a very trained eye for seeing the signs of what is going on.

ND: Thank you very much for this interview Thomas and I look forward to engaging with you again in the future