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# Integral Ethics for Social Workers

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# Integral Ethics for Social Workers

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## Abstract

Based on Wilber's integral paradigm, this meta-ethical model helps practitioners and educators see more and filter out less so that they can more authentically engage differing perspectives and experiences without compromising their own ethical orientations. Pope Francis is presented as an example of integral ethics in action.

**Keywords:** integral ethics, social work, Pope Francis

## Introduction

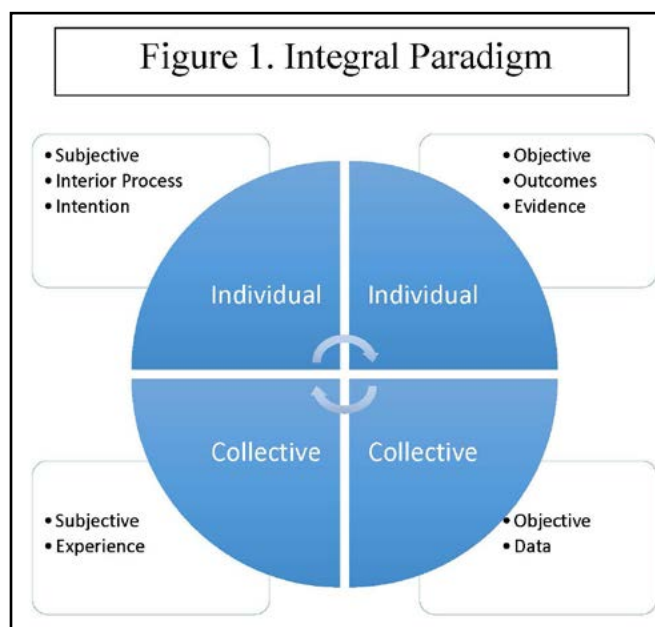
Social workers are certainly aware that as humans we each have individual experiences (both internal and external) as the unique individuals that we are, and that we also have experiences as members of many different groups—families, religious groups, social groups, political groups, and work groups, to name a few. Social workers are aware that individuals and groups also have both interior and exterior dimensions—their own internal processes that aren't necessarily open to the external world as well as outcomes that are observable to the external world.

Nevertheless, social workers and educators still get embroiled in some of the nastiest arguments about who is right, most ethical or unethical, when it comes to gay marriage, abortion, Republicans in social work—fill in the blank! This article presents a meta-ethical framework that allows practitioners, educators and students to *see* the multiple, simultaneous and interrelated dimensions of these dilemmas. Pope Francis is presented as a concrete touch-point for applying this framework.

## Integral Paradigm Applied to Ethical Reasoning

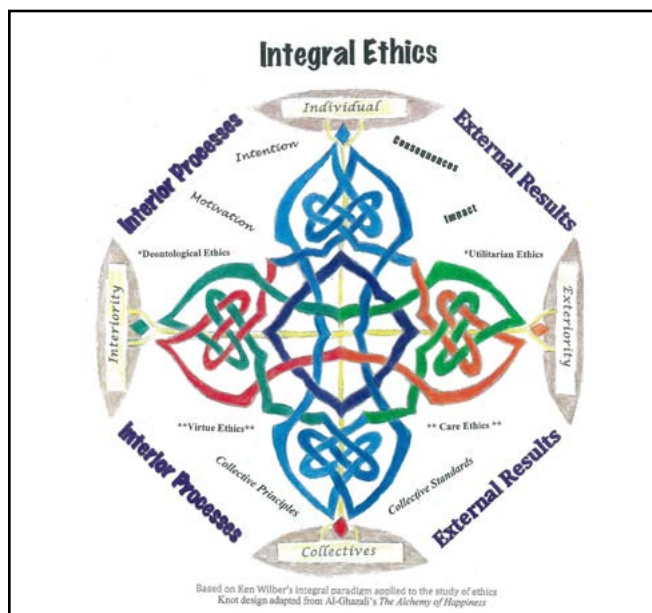
Wilber's integral paradigm (Wilber, 2006, 2001, 2000, 1997) used widely across disciplines and translated into more than 25 languages, articulates four simultaneous, inseparable and irreducible dimensions of reality. He uses a graph containing four quadrants, key words and arrows pointed in four directions to illustrate the interrelatedness, depth and complexity of each dimension. Simply put, human beings simultaneously have interior (subjective) and exterior (objective) perspectives and experiences as both individuals and as members of various groups; each of these dimensions is also multi-layered and integrally connected to the other three.

Applied specifically to ethical theory and ethical decision-making, this meta-paradigm expands the way ethics can be understood and taught,



offering social work educators an opportunity to teach ethics in a richer, more authentically inclusive way. Building on principle-based (deontological) and consequentialist (teleological) schools of reasoning usually presented as individually-oriented approaches to ethical decision making in social work (Strom-Gottfried, 2008; Reamer, 2006; Robison & Reeser, 1999; Mattison, 2000), Augustine (2010) suggests that two collectively-oriented schools of reasoning, virtue ethics and care ethics, could complete Wilber's four quadrant schema. These two approaches to ethical reasoning have particular relevance to social workers and social work educators. Care ethics with its emphasis on power imbalances in relationship and evidence-based standards of care, and virtue ethics with its focus on becoming the right kind of *person* (not just knowing the rules and following them), are both oriented to groups (or collectives) and are as timely now as they were when these schools of ethics were first introduced. Interestingly, these two ethical approaches have also received more attention from social workers in recent years (Pullen-Sansfacon, 2010; Adams, 2009; Meagher & Parton, 2004; McBeath & Webb, 2002). In an integral frame, all four of these systems of ethical reasoning are inseparable, irreducible and interconnected; they are not understood in mutually-exclusive terms. Rather, they represent four concurrent dimensions of human experience. We are simultaneously individuals that have principles, emotions and interior lives, aware of the consequences of our individual behaviors and the behaviors of others (interior and exterior *individual* experiences), **and** we have internalized values and developed enduring qualities (virtues) based on groups that contribute to the development of character based on certain "facts" considered objectively true by these groups (subjective and objective dimensions of group identity).

Using this framework, one could "walk around" the four quadrants using an issue like marriage to illustrate four different ways of concluding that gay marriage is ethical or unethical. The former Iowa Supreme Court Justice made an individual decision to support gay marriage (and



subsequently lost her seat) not because she was a gay right's advocate. Ironically, she was a Catholic who happened to also have a deeply held conviction (deontological ethics) about due process and couldn't convince herself that it should be denied to LGBTQ persons. A more utilitarian position favoring gay marriage might be based on the unacceptable consequences to family members when same sex partners cannot make end of life decisions for their partners. Using a more data-driven, collective logic (care ethics quadrant), one might present a statistic estimating the numbers of partners denied health care coverage (routinely allowed heterosexual spouses) because they could not be married. And, using a collective (virtue ethics) line of reasoning, one could argue that the virtues of human dignity and standing in solidarity with marginalized populations requires that social workers (as a group) support gay marriage. In a similar way, one could "walk around" the quadrant identifying deontological, consequentialist, care ethics and virtue ethics reasoning *against* gay marriage. Once social workers recognize that we all have *some* experience (however limited) in *each* of the four quadrants, i.e., use all four kinds of logic in different contexts, we create more space for ourselves to respond to the complexities of any ethical dilemma with more authenticity and less fear of the other. We don't feel pressured to agree with every point of view, nor do

we feel the need to defend one particular position exclusively because we can actually *see* a more complicated, interconnected (integral) reality.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice and Education**

Social work practitioners and educators are already aware of how important it is to pay attention to both *individual* and *collective* experiences, as well as *interior* processes and *external* results. So, the integral paradigm is hardly new information for us. What is new and potentially transformative is the way this paradigm puts these perspectives together and how this complex, integrative framework can be used to help practitioners, educators and students deconstruct seemingly intractable disagreements. We can use it to see what quadrant *we* are operating from in a given context, and how others may be operating from other quadrant perspectives. Simply seeing this often brings an initial relief, perhaps an “ah-ha” moment. We see that in *any* ethical dilemma there are individually-oriented outcomes as well as individual principles and/or motivations at stake. At the same time, we see that there are also collectively-oriented outcomes and collectively-oriented virtues at stake because social workers are simultaneously members of multiple groups that have varying external standards of care and collectively understood character traits that we value.

Religious social work educators and students, for example, often experience conflicting loyalties as members of their families, churches, political organizations and other social groups, not to mention professional organizations like NASW or CSWE. As *individuals*, we forge identities *within* each of these groups, while simultaneously moving *between* these groups, each of which provide a sense of identity and/or a sense of community. Although the groups and identities vary (from conservative to liberal, and from secular to religious), we all forge our professional identities similarly amidst all this complexity. In every context social workers find themselves, they receive internal as well as external validation for adhering to certain principles and behaviors and for disavowing others. Simply

“identifying with” social work values and ethics doesn’t reduce the complexity of navigating these “troubled waters.” Somehow, practitioners have to figure out how to “hold” all this complexity, and the integral frame can help us do this.

Once *seen* in this more complicated and nuanced way, ethical reasoning and decision-making become more dynamic (less mechanical) processes that require continuous movement from quadrant to quadrant. As we consider perspectives and experiences from each quadrant (with regard to others as well as ourselves), practitioners and educators can more readily see how and where *we* get stuck. We are then free to more actively engage clients and/or students in seeing their “go to” quadrant, or “dominant hand.”

Most people are not ambidextrous. Even though we have two hands and use them both, most of us have a preferred hand, one we use more often and with more ease. Once we realize that we also have preferred ways of thinking and orienting ourselves to the world, we can see how our preference (or “dominant hand”) impacts our perceptions, experiences, judgments and choices. What’s more, we can see that others are similarly impacted by the “dominant hand” that they use in certain contexts. Even more transformative is the awareness that we can also use our “other hand” to authentically engage differing points of view without compromising our own. We can actually understand points of view radically different than our own because we recognize how we use that “other hand” in our lives at times. We begin to see how we tend to get stuck when we define an issue or dilemma in terms of one particular quadrant. It’s like suddenly remembering that we have two hands and two feet that we can use to consider other perspectives. Exploring experiences and perspectives from other quadrants allows us to make legitimate connections with these “other” perspectives even though they are not ours. We recognize the reality that we need not change our positions or agree with others in order to *see* their realities and invest them with some credibility.

Some assume incorrectly that an integral view suggests a kind of undisciplined or

irresponsible relativism. It might appear to undermine commitments and convictions, when in fact, this more complex view can actually support and deepen convictions. Without suggesting that everything is relative or that “anything goes,” this framework doesn’t privilege one worldview while marginalizing others-- it holds all the parts together, and values it *all*. Rather than suggesting that nothing really matters, this both/and rather than either/or framework shows us that it *all matters*.

Clearly, social workers will not always agree or come to a consensus on many issues facing us today, but learning to see in this more nuanced way frees us to authentically engage in difficult conversations without needing to hide any dimension of who we each are. This perspective allows us to engage with ethical dilemmas and come up with responses that none of us as individuals could have come up with alone.

Some social work educators remain concerned that behaviorally-focused, competency-based education *without* the concurrent development of moral character and virtues leaves social workers ill-prepared for the complexities of modern life (Chamiec-Case, 2013; Costello, 2013; McBeath & Webb, 2002). Holly (1996) makes the interesting point that including a virtue ethics perspective has a number of advantages for those interested in developing a global ethic: flexibility, cross cultural adaptability, “motivational force,” and attainment of higher aims (p. 9). Because an integral lens can expand the way practitioners and educators think about ethics, how they make decisions and judgments about what is ethical and unethical, it offers them an opportunity to attend to the character development of students and clients in addition to their behaviors. Already applied to clinical practice and psychotherapy (Forman, 2010), the integral paradigm can help social work educators become more conscious of the subjective dimensions of student experiences like intersectionality, as important aspects of professional identity formation. This can help educators see how developing cultural humility as a virtue (subjective quadrant) is as important as developing skills and competencies (objective

quadrant). Although difficult to discuss let alone measure in many outcome-dominated learning environments, these conversations are critical in social work.

Now, let’s consider how this framework might be used to analyze the behaviors and teachings of a particularly noteworthy individual: Pope Francis. As a non-Catholic who has taught in a Catholic University for over twenty years, I have found him to be an interesting study in leadership, as well as a fascinating case for applying this integral ethics framework.

### **Pope Francis: An Interesting Case in Point**

Well before his momentous visit to the United States, Pope Francis’s “rock star appeal” captured the imagination of the popular press as well as religious journals around the world (AllAfrica.com, 2013; Allen, 2013; Booth, 2013; Jackson, 2013; Reese, 2013; Rusthoven, 2013; Weigel, 2013; Murphy-Gill, 2014; Willian, 2014). And, of course, the American imagination has also been recently stirred: John Boehner’s tearful public response and subsequent resignation; dogs and babies wearing miters, a tailgating party hosted by nuns at Catholic U, a rainbow (on an otherwise dry day) before his tour of Central Park, and even being called “cool” by a feminist columnist who considers him a “perilous Pope” (Dowd, 2015).

From an integral perspective, he has endeared *and* aggravated *both* liberals and conservatives based on his vision (Jackson, 2013), his revolutionary ideas and efficient managerial style (Fea, 2013; Weigel, 2013), and his scathing critique of unfettered capitalism (Willan, 2014; Pope Francis, 2013, paragraphs 52-60).

His wide and somewhat perplexing appeal suggests that he is an integral thinker and quite possibly one of the most timely, public and accessible exemplars of integral ethics. Ivereigh (2014) provides personal insights into the development of Pope Francis’s thinking including riveting Argentinian cultural and historical backdrops, as well as the “hitherto untold story of how and why he was

elected pope” (pp. 349-367). The commemorative edition of *Us* (2015) provides a collage of quotes and pictures, giving readers a glimpse of the Pope’s penchant for the tango, basketball, soccer, and Lord of the Rings as well as his theology focusing on common people, healing wounds, and mercy above all else (Steel, 2015) —all this suggesting even more evidence of his “integral” approach.

As a priest, Jose Bergoglio began articulating four principles as early as 1974 in response to the need for reform in Argentina. He considered them “the axis around which reconciliation can revolve” (Ivereigh, 2014, p.143), and these four principles began showing up regularly in his writings and speeches, eventually shared with the world in his first encyclical as Pope, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Francis used these four principles as he developed relationships and public dialogues between Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and even evangelical communities in Argentina. Now he uses them to work with major divides between liberals and conservatives in the Catholic hierarchy, most recently during the Synod on the Family where divisive issues around divorce, remarriage, and who should be able to receive the sacraments were debated.

In *Joy of the Gospel*, Francis identifies and elaborates on each of the principles: 1) time is greater than space, 2) unity prevails over conflict, 3) realities are more important than ideas, and 4) the whole is greater than the part, noting that they reflect “constant tensions present in every social reality.” Note the inseparable, integral nature of his language. Throughout the encyclical he gives attention to the interior life of individuals and to external structures and consequences that can either hamper or be helpful. He is critical of too much emphasis on individualism and not enough emphasis on collective values and communities. He repeatedly argues for a kind of principled flexibility that asks us to “go forth from our own comfort zone” in order to experience the “unpredictable” nature of God’s word that will “surpass our calculations” and efforts to be exclusively outcome-focused.

Not surprisingly, his position on abortion is deontologically pro-life based on the conviction that “a human being is always sacred and inviolable, in

any situation and at every stage of development,” (paragraph 213) but he simultaneously acknowledges the consequences to women when the Church fails to support them in difficult situations, especially when pregnancies are the result of rape or occur in the context of extreme poverty. In this same paragraph, Francis poses a compelling, integrally oriented question, “Who can remain unmoved before such painful situations?” Or, recall the memorable request before he made after addressing Congress: “... I ask you all please to pray for me. And if there are among you any who do not believe or cannot pray, I ask you to please send good wishes my way” (McClam, 2015, n.p.)

In these ways, he demonstrates an integrated sensitivity and complex system of ethical reasoning, embodying the four principles he first articulated more than 40 years ago.

### **Time is greater than space**

In these few paragraphs (222-225), Pope Francis makes some surprising philosophical statements about time and space. For starters, he suggests that time is greater than space because he equates time with fullness and an “expression of the horizon which is constantly opening before us,” whereas space is identified as a wall, a limitation or “enclosure.” He notes that people live and are “poised” between these two inseparable and concurrent realities, between the subjective and the more concrete dimensions of human experience, as he critiques the modern obsession with immediate results (looking exclusively at objective realities). He argues that maintaining a more balanced (integral) perspective allows us to work “slowly but surely” in a way that helps us endure adverse situations while making the inevitable changes in our plans that this view requires. It’s why he says that giving priority to time means giving priority to “initiating processes rather than possessing spaces,” expanding his argument to engage individuals and groups to “develop the actions which generate new processes” so that they “bear fruit in significant historical events.” While Francis is tenacious in his commitment to principles and virtues, he also recognizes the consequences of both individual and

collective action.

### **Unity prevails over conflict**

Next, Pope Francis takes up the constant tension between conflict and unity, again suggesting an integral relationship between the two. He begins by noting the importance of facing conflict rather than ignoring, minimizing or concealing it, but also acknowledges how we can get lost in conflict:

When conflict arises, some people simply look at it and go their way as if nothing happened; they wash their hands of it and get on with their lives. Others embrace it in such a way that they become its prisoners; they lose their bearings, project onto institutions their own confusion and dissatisfaction and thus make unity impossible. But there is also a third way, and it is the best way to deal with conflict. It is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it, and to make it a link in the chain of a new process. "Blessed are the peacemakers!" (Mt5:9).

In this way it becomes possible to build communion amid disagreement, but this can only be achieved by those great persons who are willing to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity (paragraphs 227-228).

Francis talks about solidarity as a way of "making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions, and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity," making the point that this isn't absorbing one view into another, but rather a "resolution that takes place on a higher plane" and that actually "preserves what is valid and useful on both sides" (paragraphs 227-228).

### **Realities are more important than ideas**

These few paragraphs are perhaps the most

surprising given what many would expect of a religious leader. In this section he indicts not only politicians and educators, but also religious institutions for separating ideas from realities:

Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason (paragraph 232).

He warns of getting stuck in the realm of pure ideas and of reducing our work to mere rhetoric and modeling a rationality that is disconnected from the lived experiences of most people. That is why he concludes that *realities are greater than ideas*. Here, realities and ideas correspond with the objective and subjective (exterior and interior) dimensions of the integral paradigm. When he says that exterior realities (behaviors, consequences and outcomes) are more important than ideas (interior values, beliefs), he is making a radical statement as a religious leader, and he does so because he maintains that realities call us to action more than conceptual abstractions.

### **The whole is greater than the part**

Pope Francis ends this integral discourse by offering a holistic, systems view of the world and human experience. Beginning by discussing the tension between globalization and localization, he notes that this tension prevents us from falling into either of two extremes: getting caught up in an abstract globalized universe or turning to "a museum of local folklore," neither of which evoke the "totality or integrity" of the gospel. Once again, Francis suggests a both/and approach, noting that the best visual model is a polyhedron (rather than a circle) because it "reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness" (paragraph 236). He notes that political and pastoral activity both seek to "gather in this polyhedron the best of each," making the surprising observation that even those of questionable character or merit



have something to offer “which must not be overlooked” (paragraph 236). What an important affirmation for social work practitioners and educators as well!

## Summary

Regardless of their religious orientation or the lack thereof, social workers can find inspiration in Pope Francis’s more complex orientation to ethics. His nuanced approach emphasizes constant inseparable tensions that undergird human experience. When social workers can first *see* and then acknowledge these tensions, they are *free* to be less defensive and have more genuinely inclusive, less judgmental responses to ethical dilemmas **without** compromising their values or beliefs. Liberals want Francis to modernize church doctrine while conservatives want him to defend their positions; he has done neither. Instead, he prefers to stress what he suggests has been hidden from view: loving kindness and forgiving mercy. Francis is reported to have said:

If the Church is alive, it must always surprise... A Church that doesn’t have the capacity to surprise is a weak, sickened and dying Church. It should be taken to the recovery room at once (Ivereigh, 2014, p. 396).

Need it be said that the same holds true for social work and social work education? More than ever, social work needs practitioners and educators who can be as nimble, yet principled and authentic in responding to the complex ethical issues facing our profession today.

With a little practice using this integral framework, social workers and educators can develop facility in moving from quadrant to quadrant on most any issue or challenge. As we develop this facility, and continue to work through our own (interior and exterior) conflicts as individuals and as members of various groups that sustain our identities, this integral lens provides us with a nonjudgmental reference point for maintaining

consciousness of our own development. Not only that, we become less cynical or hard-hearted towards others who are reasoning differently based on where they are in *theirs*.

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