



The Development of Desire

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ABSTRACT: In this article I propose that desire, as all lines of development, evolves toward greater complexity and is an all-quadrant phenomenon. For this reason, I situate desire and sex (from pre-conventional to conventional to post-conventional and beyond) within an Integral framework. Integral theory offers a unique view of desire, a possibility to understand all levels of desire as embodied wisdom, however partial each view might be.

Introduction

“Sex. In America an obsession. In other parts of the world a fact.” - Marlene Dietrich

Sexual desire is a natural and necessary condition of every human animal. How we relate to that desire, and what we do with it, has the power to break individuals and communities apart, as well as to bring us together. Sexual desire typically gets either a good rap or a bad one. It is commonly seen as either the root of all evil or the root of all salvation. Rarely do we consider the complex nature of how we relate to sexual desire and what we do with it.

An Integral approach is not satisfied with desire’s dualistic street press. It goes beyond a discourse of good and evil, by looking into sexual desire as a path of development. Like any path, there is an acceptance of the ground that we walk upon. In this case, there is an acceptance of sexual desire as indigenous to the human body, psyche, and spirit. Prior to interpretation and judgment, there is tacit recognition of what simply exists. There is an acceptance of the fact that, while no two views along the path will ever be the same, some accounts are more truthful than others. An Integral approach takes a developmental



perspective in order to illuminate the path of sexual desire, as well as to discriminate the important differences among the many perspectives on desire. It is these differences that an Integral view takes into consideration, both theoretically and in their embodiment. Here, we will begin to explore that path.

Let's admit it. In the conventional forms of most religious traditions, and in many spiritual circles, sexual desire has a fairly bad reputation.¹ In the Christian tradition, sexual desire is the reason that Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden. It is the reason for the fall from God's grace. It is testament to our uncivilized nature, a force to be banned, controlled or tamed. Desire is evil. Sinful. Demonic. Desire is primal. Base. Raw. Instinctual. We devote scriptures, laws, and moral codes to the regulation of desire. We dedicate a considerable amount of time, energy and public funds, at the highest levels of government, to what could otherwise be described as sexual policy.²

As Freud made clear in the Victorian era, our human sexual desire, and how it manifests in human relations, is often in direct conflict with our most sacred, conventional beliefs about what is socially acceptable. How we account for this chasm between social beliefs and manifest behaviors is just one area in which an Integral approach offers a more comprehensive view. This approach provides us with a new understanding of how human beings can be divided and made whole—both within ourselves and within our communities. Needless to say, achieving such cognitive understanding is but one crucial, first step in a bona fide Integral methodology. At its best, by providing a more accurate understanding of human sexual desire, such an Integral approach aims to identify the most skillful means for repairing those physical, psychological/spiritual, social and cultural fractures.

As recent media coverage of pedophile priests illustrates, when such a divergence between beliefs and behavior is brought to light, we encounter a chorus of opposite opinions. We tend to hear either deafening silence in the face of these damning facts, or the chaotic voices of condemnation. Seldom do we look within ourselves for understanding, while also being



willing to act (in this case, with basic moral indignation and legal punishment) for the benefit of all in society. An Integral approach-in-action takes up that challenge and does not turn a blind eye to that imperative.

In contrast to the voice of conventional condemnation, popular culture elevates desire's bad rap to demigod status. The U.S. media would have us believe that sexual desire, as epitomized by Penthouse, Cosmopolitan, phone-sex 900 numbers, and "pay per view" pornography, is the raw truth. It is the primal force of creativity—the revelation of our base nature. It is the source of rebellion against all things conventional and traditional. In some spiritual circles, sexual desire is considered to be the very source of enlightenment itself. Turn on any contemporary music video channel and you will witness the phenomenon: sexual desire is to be worshipped, both figuratively and literally.

These approaches, both the conventional voice of condemnation and the pop-cultural voice of blind acceptance, illustrate different levels of an exclusive identity with one's own worldview. That exclusive identification is the hallmark of what Integral Theory defines, drawing on terms associated with Don Beck's Spiral Dynamics Integral, as a first-tier value structure (i.e., an exclusive identity), as opposed to a second-tier or Integral value structure (i.e., an inclusive identity), which allows for multiperspectival awareness. For lack of the ability to see the world from a different vantage point, both camps are entrenched in their own perspectives. The sexual fundamentalists and the sexual libertines are endlessly at war. These entrenched views were recently illustrated in two quite distinct responses to two decidedly different entertainment segments at the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show. The sexual libertines were represented by the deafening silence in reaction to the portion of the halftime show where Kid Rock repeatedly grabbed his crotch during his dance routine. In contrast, the sexual fundamentalists cried out in a riot of moral indignation about Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction." Leaving the clearly gendered implications of these two contracting responses aside for the moment, suffice it to say that the fundamentalists and the libertines go to the mat so often, and with such predictability, that we take the polarity of



these views for granted. The Integral proposition is quite distinct, suggesting that there is actually wisdom embodied in each of these views of sexual desire, however incomplete each view might be.

From a first-tier perspective, we pretend that desire has to be either repressed and ignored, or exalted and laid bare. The United States is a culture totally obsessed with sex but also a culture totally terrified of it. In truth, the United States suffers from both the abuse of sexuality, deeply embedded in its cultural history, and from a sexual repression, embedded just as deeply. A compassionate understanding of those two pathologies in individuals and in communities is a hallmark of the Integral approach.

An Integral/developmental perspective

“Sexuality lies between things. It is intrinsically ambiguous.” - Dimen, 1989

Among many people in the United States, the question of desire tends to elicit fairly black and white thinking. From an Integral view, such black and white thinking is evidence of an exclusive identity with a singular perspective, which is the defining characteristic of a first-tier perspective. From a second-tier, or Integral view, we are both more than our desires and able to be fully embodied in our desire. Unlike a first-tier perspective, a second-tier perspective suggests that we are neither reduced to nor limited by our desire. Desire is neither the root of all evil nor the balm of salvation. Sexual desire simply exists and there are diverse means by which sexual desire is made manifest. There is the path of sexual expression, the path of sexual abstinence and many paths in between. The Integral approach acknowledges that each of these manifestations, or types, of desire has the capacity to allow the fullest and deepest path of human development. How we each navigate our path—to what degree that path is congruent with our sense of identity and freely chosen and to what extent that path is imposed by our culture and society—will have everything to do with the human potential we eventually achieve. Desire is both a potent Pandora’s Box to be consciously opened and closed, as well as a powerful force that brings us—quite literally—to life. Sexual desire is a dance whose existence is made apparent not only by its amplification but also by its stillness



and its cessation.

The Irreducible Dimensions of Desire

“Desire can only be liberated by desire itself.” - Judith Simmer Brown, 2001

We commonly think of sexual desire as the dominion of the body. But desire is more than a physiological state of arousal. Desire is also a product of our thoughts. However, these thoughts are shaped by internalized cultural scripts about how and with whom we should and should not desire to be intimate. Sexual desire is more than a concept or a set of culture references. It goes beyond the manifest need or want associated with a certain belief or experience. Sexual desire is also the province of the mind that extends outside the bounds of cultural encoding and social acceptance. In this province of the mind, one might be habitually repressed, dissociated, or simply be able to witness one’s own desire unencumbered by the compulsive need to express it through action or inaction. Desire includes the realm of fantasy, conscious and unconscious. It is multidimensional. Desire cannot be reduced to the province of the body, the mind, or the spirit alone. Desire runs through all levels of our being.

Integral Theory suggests that all of these aspects of desire can be integrated. Through the following five elements of an Integral approach—quadrants, levels, lines, states, and types—we begin to appreciate that sexuality is truly a nuanced affair. These foundational elements of the Integral model are collectively referred to as AQAL, short for “all-quadrants, all-levels.” As we apply the Integral model, we consider that desire is the felt experience contained within sexuality, as well as the method by which we understand the presence of sexuality. This experience and understanding of desire gives dimension to what we recognize as our sexual identity. In this way, we are able to see more deeply into our own sexual nature.

Towards a Deeper Communion with Desire

From an Integral vantage point, we explicitly recognize that there is often a significant rift between what we feel, what we do, and what we say, both to ourselves and to others.



Sometimes these differences point to the roots of deep dysfunction and sometimes they illuminate of a profound integration. In order to arrive at a deeper communion with desire, and its inherent complexity, we will look at how each of the five elements of the Integral model can illuminate its dimensions. To begin with, we will examine the quadratic dimensions of the human wants and needs that compose sexual desire. The quadrants represent the four most basic perspectives an individual can inhabit. These perspectives include the interior and exterior of individuals and collectives: individual-interior or subjectivity (Upper-Left quadrant); individual-exterior or objectivity (Upper-Right quadrant); collective-interior or intersubjectivity (Lower-Left quadrant); and collective-exterior or interobjectivity (Lower-Right quadrant). Figure 1 below presents some of the defining aspects of each quadrant.

	INTERIOR	EXTERIOR
INDIVIDUAL	UL Intention "I"	UR Behavior "It"
COLLECTIVE	LL Culture "We"	LR Systems "Its"

Figure 1. Some Aspects of the Four Quadrants



Quadrants

Upper Right: Sexual Behavior, the acting out of desire

In the Upper-Right quadrant, we find our physiological response, the correlates of what we actually experience on a sensate or energetic level.³ The Upper-Right quadrant deals with the many ways we touch, on a literal, tactile level. This quadrant also accounts for our biological similarities and differences, including hormonal influences, anatomical structures, arousal states, and sensory perceptions. The presence or absence of sexually transmitted diseases is accounted for here, as is sexual functioning. In this quadrant we can examine how sexuality is manifest in the physical self, through the gestures of how we care for (and/or abuse) the temple of the body. The Upper-Right quadrant is focused on the physical sexual body, its biology, and its behavior.

Upper-Left: Sexual Identity, the feeling of desire

This quadrant is the province of our thoughts, fantasies, wishes, memories, dreams, fears and anxieties, somatic experiences, jealousies, etc. Our guilt, shame, and psychic pleasure reside here. This is the place where the conscious and the unconscious converge and diverge. This is the place where we formulate, negotiate, and refigure our sense of identity. Who we tell ourselves we are has everything to do with what we actually do (Upper Right), how we make meaning of what we actually do, and what we allow sexual partners to do to us. When we say to ourselves, “it was a meaningless one night stand,” ask, “who am I now that I have done this?” or when we assert who we love or who loves us, we are operating in the province of the individual, interior sense of identity. The mind governs how we rationalize who we make love with and why.

Lower Left: Sexual Culture, the allowing (and forbidding) of desire

A group’s collective interior arises from its cultural background—religious, philosophical, ethical, ethnic, and otherwise. The Western Judeo-Christian definition of sin is rooted here, as well as our sense of shared, internalized guilt and shame. Our ignorance of other sexual identities, particularly those that do not conform to stereotypes of “normal” sexual identity



or behavior, is anchored in the Lower-Left quadrant. Often, we literally cannot see those realities that exist outside the bounds of cultural acknowledgement. The forces of popular culture can, at a certain level of development, make it difficult to identify and value the specificity of our own desire. By the same token, at another level of development, such forces of popular culture can facilitate the identification of our desire, at least in a general sense. A deep appreciation for the role of the Lower-Left quadrant helps us to realize that our cultural values can either illuminate and/or obscure the awareness and manifestation of our own desire. People deny, fight, and suppress their own desire not only due to a lack of opportunity (Lower Right) or a lack of internal acceptance (Upper Left), but because they may not even recognize their own desire when it appears. In effect, the Lower Left—the collective interior—is a filter of desire, determining what you are allowed to feel, value, or think.

Individuals may deny deep sexual desires due to a lack of cultural cues to guide them or due to the presence of cultural cues that are damning and terrifying. Some individuals embrace culturally prescribed behaviors as the only natural and normal course of sexual expression. While some find joy in those behaviors, others find only suffering. Some individuals seek out a subculture that recognizes, validates, and mirrors their existence, allowing them to acknowledge to themselves and others the truth of their own desire. In these actions, we may begin to claim parts of ourselves that have only safely existed in the unconscious (Upper Left). It is also here that we run the risk of condemning our own desires before, during, or after we act upon them (Upper Right).

Lower Right: Sexual Politics, the governing of desire

Sexual desire is typically an intimate act, and yet, as feminist scholars and activists have long made apparent, social systems and institutions directly influence, shape, and govern the manifestation of our desire. Sex workers, for instance, are keenly aware that society does not sanction (Lower Left) their behavior (Upper Right). In the vast majority of states in the U.S., sex workers can be arrested and incarcerated (Lower Right) for engaging in an exchange of sex for money. Yet they choose (or are compelled), to pursue a course of sexual activity at the



expense being cut off from mainstream society. On the other hand, the Lower-Right quadrant points to the need for social acceptance and communion and how such a need will govern what we choose to reveal or conceal about our sexuality. As human animals, we need social interaction, friendship, employment, community, and love. This is the province of those manifest relations—in the bedroom, the bathroom, at the bar, and in the boardroom. What social spaces exist that allow one to enact desire? Which social spaces prohibit one from accepting and acting on their desire? For example, a 12-year old student in a state with a conservative government may be taught that sexual acts are only permissible within the boundaries of a heterosexual, long-term, monogamous, state-sanctioned marriage. A 12-year old in a state with a more liberal government, may be taught that sexual acts are permissible between any two consenting adults who agree to take full responsibility for their bodies and their actions. The collective exterior is a crucible of desire: determining which sexual behaviors are embraced, through social institutions, social policies, etc. that mirror the Lower-Left values codes. Concretely, the Lower Left exerts pressures on our physical movement in the world, through the physical structures of society which recognize some desires and prohibit others.



The various aspects of desire discussed above can be represented in the four quadrants in the following way:

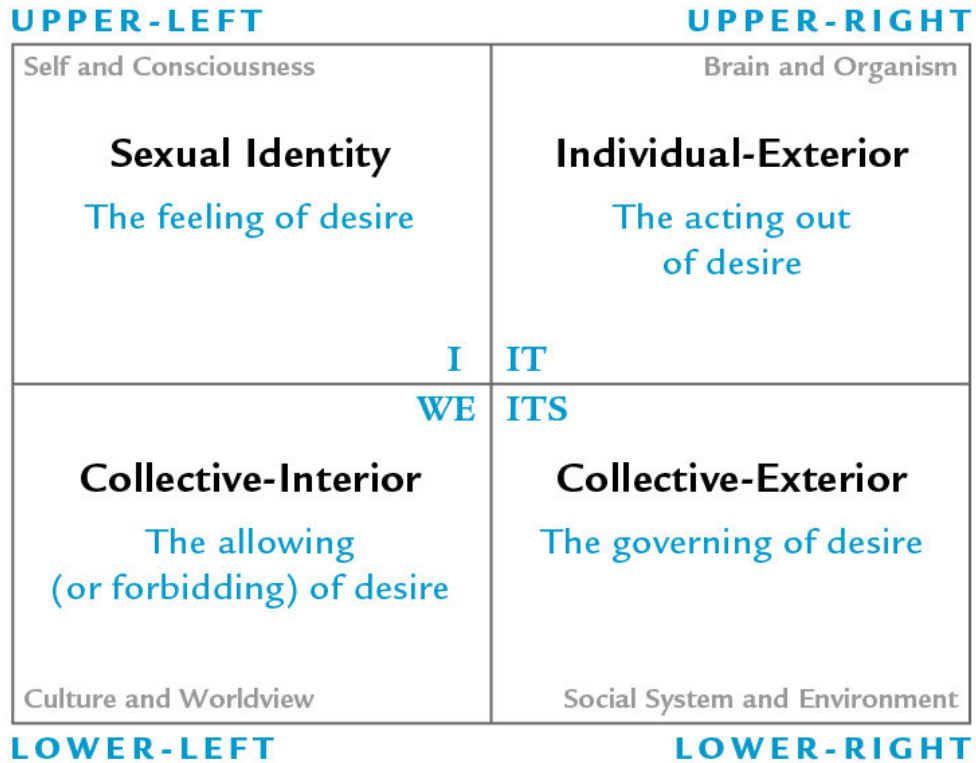


Figure 2. The Four Quadrants of Desire

Levels

As Anais Nin so aptly stated, “We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.” The eyes we use to look upon the world have everything to do with the world that is seen. This simple truth points to the levels of development that dramatically influence our sense of reality—consensual or otherwise. Simply put, development means that we evolve as individuals, as societies, and as cultures. Our level of evolutionary realization allows, invites, and perceives an ever deepening, ever broadening nested hierarchy of existence (a holarchic system of interconnected whole/parts). The manifestation of such evolution is straightforward. As we develop on an individual level, we become less and less egocentric and, at the same time, become increasingly able to see beyond the self. As we evolve, we are less and



less cognitively threatened by other existences that do not appear to mirror our own, and we are more and more comfortable with our own path of sexual expression.⁴

Through this Integral evolution, we become increasingly capable of recognizing who we truly are, independent of any fixed or static identity. We are less and less afraid to be ourselves, more and more embracing of the many types of sexuality embodied by others, and increasingly discerning about the levels of sexual development across all types. Such development moves from a pre-conventional to a conventional to a post-conventional to a post-post conventional sexual orientation.⁵ And, in accordance with our diminishing egocentricity and our expanded sense of self, these four levels increasingly become the true compass for any meaningful “sexual orientation,” across all types of sexual identity.

Pre-conventional

The stereotypical male predator can serve as an example of sexual orientation at the pre-conventional level. He has little, if any, sense of obligation to the other for the simple reason that, by and large, he does not concern himself with the other. His concern is self-centered and egoic. He cannot yet fully adopt the perspective of his sexual partner. While this narcissism is natural and normal at this first stage and allows one to stabilize a sense of autonomy, the shadow side of this level of development is characterized by a habitual objectification of the other, a tendency towards gratuitous domination and aggression, rebellion against conventional notions of social responsibility, and impulsivity. The male predator has little awareness that his sexual desire—which is invariably governed by power at this stage, rather than intimacy—has consequences beyond his own temporal sense of control and satisfaction. Everything is an object. And while we can all laugh in jest at such a masculine stereotype (and its feminine corollary), we are all too familiar with the portrait.⁶ This extreme caricature of base human development may also make us recoil, but, I would argue, we recoil to the extent that we know the truth it reveals about this very real level of sexual development.



In addressing different types across all levels of development, we must address the feminine stereotype as well. Where the masculine pre-conventional sexual stereotype is one of self-absorption and has limited consciousness of or regard for the other, the feminine stereotype, at the pre-conventional level, is one of total absorption by the other—to the point of fusion. What characterizes this stage of development is the absence of a felt sense of individuated self-awareness. Often she is the accomplice to and enabler of the narcissistic male predator. She is the archetypal and mythological Echo to Narcissus, deriving her sense of self wholly from his sound and his image. Without consciousness of herself as a sexual agent, she is the quintessential virgin, lacking sexual agency, or the quintessential prostitute, lacking sexual morals. At the pre-conventional level, both the virgin and the prostitute have in common dissociation from their sexuality. Both are lacking the ability to witness and stabilize a sexual self-concept. They cannot consciously surrender sexually because they have no stable sense of self to give. They cannot consciously receive sexually because there is no stable sense of self to embrace another.

Conventional level

At the conventional level of sexual development, the line between normal and abnormal behavior, between normal and abnormal identity, is seemingly definitive and self-evident. Cultural norms define our conventions. Cultural norms in the U.S. for instance, sanction heterosexual identity and monogamous sexual partnership, as symbolized and legitimized through legal marriage. It is important to clearly state that, like any sexual type, such a heterosexual identity and/or monogamous sexual behavior also traverses the developmental spectrum and is not to be conflated with a conventional level. The tell tale indicator of such a conventional level of sexual development is not only (or even) the embodiment of this specific type of sexuality but rather the belief that this type of sexuality is the only “right” or “acceptable” type of sexuality (also see the section below on types). This conflation of type and level is a hallmark of the conventional view. At the conventional level of sexual development, there is a premium placed on the lower quadrants because individual development is readily sacrificed in favor of group assimilation. Only at the post-



conventional level do other diverse realities emerge.

Post-conventional level

At the post-conventional level of sexual development, we begin to author our own codes of sexual behavior by drawing on universal principles. Rather than acquiescing to what my country says is right or wrong, as we do at the conventional level, at the post-conventional level there is a move toward a worldcentric morality. Here we begin to more adequately differentiate and disentangle the following four aspects of desire: physiology and behavior (Upper Right), thoughts, feelings, and identity (Upper Left), cultural values (Lower Left), and social relations (Lower Right). Through this disentanglement, we make more room for the real differences in sexual identity and behavior that have always existed. We discover new terms to identify those ways of being in the world. The translation of sexual identity and behavior becomes substantially more nuanced. Yet, even at this level, we remain restricted to a material view of reality. From a post-conventional stance, while we respect the many forms of sexual expression that exist, our view of human nature is still centered at the personal level. Limited by such a personal view, we are not yet fully able to “see ourselves in another.” Our light, as well as our shadow, is still distanced from our deepest Self.

Post-post conventional

“We’re born naked, and everything else is drag.” – RuPaul

At the post-post-conventional levels, one recognizes that, regardless of how you experience sexuality, regardless of how you act on desire, spirit both permeates the flesh and radiates far beyond it. Mutuality might be embodied by taking control of a sexual encounter, by utterly surrendering to one’s partner, or by actively negotiating the give and take of a consensual exchange of power in the spectrum from domination to submission. A healthy, stabilized ego is able to navigate such a “power play,” in the truly playful, pleasurable sense and not in the pre-personal and pre-conventional power-over subject/object sense. Sexual development at a post-post conventional level allows for both total control and a total relinquishing of control in order to more fully embrace the Self, without a loss of self. This level of development of



sexual desire respects that the dynamics of will and surrender involve a radical praxis of agency-in-communion.

At the post-post conventional or second tier levels of sexual development, we gain insight into the illusory nature of any sensate reality. We recognize the limits of any single embodiment or fixed identity. And yet, paradoxically, it is by virtue of that understanding that we are then able to fully and truly embrace a dynamic identity—for the very reason that its illusory nature is not hidden from view, even in its seemingly static cloak. Here, we recognize the life of the soul and the spirit, which truly transcend sexual expression or sexual abstinence.⁷ We recognize these soul level and spirit level dimensions of our gross realm sexual existence. Like Russian dolls within dolls, we embrace the holonic (whole/part) nature of sexual desire—its roots and its wings. There is recognition of spirit enfolding soul, and soul enfolding the gross realm. We do not negate that gross realm dimension of existence, which is real at the material level, but we honor its limits. And at the post-post conventional levels we recognize the limitations of language to name our unique and dynamic experience, often turning to the art of poetry to invite a direct experience of an inclusive, yet beyond conceptual, understanding. We accept that each individual is a unique manifestation of spirit, while still remaining a part of the groups to which they truly belong. We derive our sense of belonging from our ultimate understanding that nothing is separate from who we are. This interconnectedness is spiritual in nature and radically inclusive.⁸

New Face

I have learned not to worry about love;
but to honor its coming
with all my heart.
To examine the dark mysteries
of the blood
with headless heed and
swirl,
to know the rush of feelings
swift and flowing
as water.



The source appears to be
some inexhaustible
spring
within our twin and triple
selves;
the new face I turn up
to you
no one else on earth
has ever
seen

Here, in the post-post conventional territory of desire, we begin to apprehend what poet/activist/author Alice Walker describes as the “new face” that is discovered in each and every sexual union—both by the Lover and their Beloved. We witness the “twin and triple selves” that come into being, and fall away, with the birth and death of every sacred sexual union.⁹ The egoic self is not self-absorbed, but rather it is sturdy and intact. The self recognizes the profound impact of deep mutuality and the boundaries that are truly permeable. It has the ability to erect and enforce personal boundaries that allow for dissolution into an intimacy of No Boundary born of true sexual agency. The hallmark of such a sexual identity is that there is a self to return to, and a Self that is never not present.

Lines

There are at least four important developmental lines to consider in any Integral conversation about sexuality. Three of these are associated with the Upper-Left quadrant and one with the Upper Right. The first, and arguably the most central line, to consider is the ego, or self line, of development. The self is the one who navigates the entire spiral of development, and our proximate self sense is determined by our center of gravity along this central line. The self line is like the metabolizing function of the psyche; where we are along the self line marks the division between what identity we are subject to and what identities we can see as objects of our own awareness.



The psychosexual line is another important line to consider in any Integral approach to sexuality. The psychosexual is that which underscores the level of awareness of, and relationship to, what Freud called libido, or what is understood in the yogic traditions as prana, or more broadly regarded as *élan vital*. It is the psychosexual line of development that accounts for the mental representation of our sexual instincts, impulses, and drives along the entire spectrum of consciousness.

Thirdly, there is the gender identity line. Gender identity is the line of development that negotiates one's relationship to socially ascribed gender. This relationship between one's self sense of gender identity and one's experience(s) of socially ascribed gender identity can range from ego syntonic to ego distonic. Located in an individual's interior (the Upper-Left quadrant), gender-identity is an important self-related developmental line. It is distinct from, and yet illuminated by, an all-quadrant regard for gender which assesses gender presentation(s) (Upper Right), gender role(s) (Lower Right) and gender scripts (Lower Left). Furthermore, while not prescriptive of one's psychosexual development and not necessarily mutually inclusive of sexual self concept, gender identity is an important influence on sexual self concept.

Lastly, but by no means exhaustively, the biosexual line of development runs through an individual's physicality (Upper-Right quadrant). This line is marked by the signposts of sexual maturation throughout the lifespan, such as puberty. In women, it is the biosexual line that accounts for the onset of menses and menopause. This line accounts for the hormonal changes that impact sexual drive, such as oxytocin and estrogen in women, and testosterone in men. Taken together, these four lines constitute some of the most central aspects of sexuality.

To best illustrate the importance of developmental lines in the context of other Integral factors—most notably levels and types—consider the gendered politics, which influence social response to sexual indiscretion. Consider, for instance, the fate that Hillary Clinton would



likely meet, by way of comparison with her husband, if she was discovered to be sexually involved with a Congressional intern. While President Clinton certainly was roasted for his publicized infidelity, and his personal integrity was certainly called into question, the perception of his ability to govern went largely unscathed. He remained commander in chief. I would submit that Senator Clinton—or any other high profile female politician—by contrast, would likely be run out of office by character assassination. And while there is certainly room for lively debate about this illustration, the point here is to call attention to the gendered politics of character assassination where sexual promiscuity is concerned. Our typical “double standard” assessment about self-development, gender identity, morality, and psychosexual development is differently assessed depending on our own ability to think beyond a conventional level of gender presentation. These differences point not only to different assessments of type (in this case type of gender presentation) but also to different assessments of various developmental lines (moral, psychosexual) and their relationship to the central self line of development.

States

Another integral factor in the AQAL matrix is states. States of consciousness are perhaps the most familiar concept in addressing sexual desire. In the United States, we are bombarded with media schemes for inducing altered states of consciousness that will afford us sexual desirability and sexual encounter. From alcohol, to cigarettes, to fashion, to beauty products, to carbonated beverages, to automobiles.... you name it, and the media sells it with sex. As Viagra sales demonstrate, we devote millions of dollars annually, in the public and the private sector, to supporting states of physiological arousal.¹⁰ But seldom do we attend to the real developmental work of translating ecstatic sexual states, born of sacred sexual union, to our everyday waking-state in communion with the world at large. The developmental work involved in translating such peak sexual experiences and its corresponding wisdom is the prerequisite and promise of the Tantric yogas. Tantric practitioners walk a road that simultaneously descends in an embrace of our deepest embodiment and ascends in a release



into our most expansive dissolution, thus discovering the place where those two directions melt into one path. This work creates a new stage of sexual identity, a stage at which neither partner is dependent on, nor divorced from, any specific state of sexual union.

Types

In the 21st century, we have a much more enriched sense of the divergent types of sexual behavior and identity that arise than we had half a century ago. We are beginning to recognize the co-existence of heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism, and transexuality. We are beginning to publicly witness the dynamic unfolding of sexual identity in a single lifetime—sometimes transcending and including prior sexual identities within that lifetime. We are beginning to appreciate what transgender activists have known for centuries: sexual identity and gender are not necessarily mutually determined.¹¹ Still, as a society, we are too easily given to conflating sexual type with any particular level of sexual development. Integral Theory differentiates type and level as well as state, quadrant, and line. It provides the most substantive theoretical matrix by which to examine the distinction among types of sexual practice, types of sexual identity, and levels of sexual development. Integral Theory provides the fairest forum in which to wage competing claims about the nature and course of sexual desire. When the battles of sexual normalcy (in the social values sense—Lower Left), sexual normativity (in the statistical sense—Lower Right), sexual functioning (in the behavioral sense—Upper Right), and sexual identity (in the psychological sense—Upper Left) are at issue, Integral Theory can facilitate their important distinction in the service of a more meaningful and more constructive dialogue.

Toward an Integral Sexuality

By investigating these five Integral factors, we are able to consciously consider more facets of human sexuality and their interplay than any single-school analysis of desire would allow. The Integral matrix is useful because it allows us to comment, through more precise degrees of perception, on what is already arising. In applying this holonic latticework we hope to



more adequately and comprehensively, more skillfully and compassionately, engage the mysteries, wonders, and real dilemmas of human sexuality.

Dualistic thinking is truly seductive. In a time when sexually transmitted diseases are one of the gravest causes of death for human populations worldwide, it is not difficult to appreciate the conventional moral imperative offered by conservative sexual fundamentalists.¹² In a time when ancient spiritual traditions whisper, to those who can hear, that sexuality can be a path of nothing less than enlightenment, it is not easy to dismiss the post-conventional moral embrace offered by sexual libertines. Yet, here—in this land of dualistic delusion where sexual desire is merely good or evil—the Integral approach would assert that we must not be seduced. We must take all the care and consideration that the true mutuality of sacred union involves, see those perspectives from within, and strive for an ever deeper, ever wider Integral embrace.



Endnotes

¹ The terms “Pre-conventional,” “Conventional,” and “Post-conventional” are used throughout this article to indicate broad levels of development. These terms, which were originally used by Lawrence Kohlberg, are also used to describe the developmental progression of the moral line: Kohlberg, *Essays on moral development*, 1981

² The issues such policies legislate include the practice of abortion, the right to marriage, the legality of prostitution, the application of censorship, the definition of rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and many others.

³ Integral Theory has begun to explicitly discuss the many levels of body that arise—from gross, to subtle to causal. Any comprehensive statement about sexual desire and Integral Theory must account for those multiple levels of individual exterior manifestation.

⁴ Where direct physical threats are concerned (in the instance of rape, abuse, incest, etc) we seek to understand such behavior while, at the same time, we are compelled to act on a social level—often with legal prosecution in these cases. The differentiation between psychological and physical fears, and their mutual influence, is an important distinction with Integral Theory.

⁵ Pre-conventional sexuality is defined by subject-object “I-it” language and the absence of a second person “you” and first person plural “we” perspective. Conventional sexuality is defined almost entirely by a second person plural “you all,” which subsumes “me.” Post-conventional is defined by an “I-thou” subject-subject, human-human relationship that prioritizes a “we” without sacrificing “I” or “thou”.

⁶ Integral Theory makes important distinctions between biological sex (such as male and female) and psychological typologies (such as masculine and feminine), thus accounting for a broad spectrum of gendered identities and sexual identities. I am conflating these meaningful distinctions here intentionally. For at the pre-conventional level of development, “real” men are defined according to an exclusively masculine typology and, likewise, “real” women are defined according to an exclusively feminine typology. A hallmark of the pre-conventional level of development is an inability to adequately differentiate sex and gender.

⁷ Asexuality certainly needs to be honored and included in any bona fide Integral treatment of sexuality and the development of desire. While the statistics are debated, it is generally believed, according to current human sexuality research, that about 1% of all people are asexual. But how are we operationally defining asexuality? I believe Integral theory can help us achieve a more complete and complex operational definition of sexuality in order to help clarify just these sorts of confusions. Are we referring to sexual feeling states (Upper Right) and/or sexual identity (Upper Left) and/or sexual behavior (Lower Right)? Many research method questions, still debated among human sexuality experts, arise in the wake of discussion about operational definitions. For instance, do we accept self report as a viable method for analysis of sexual behavior? How closely do sexual identity and sexual behavior align, and how does this alignment vary across populations? Many who choose to be celibate for religious/spiritual or other reasons nevertheless experience sexual states of arousal. In this instance, “asexual” refers to an absence of sexual behavior with another person, but does not exclude sexual arousal or even sexual expression without a partner. A different definition of asexuality is the absence not only of sexual expression with another person but also the absence of sexual states of arousal. My principle effort in this article is to distinguish just these dimensions of desire, such as states of sexual arousal from the decision, or impulse, to act on those sexual feelings with another person, in order to foster a more effective and comprehensive dialogue about the complex territory of human sexuality.

⁸ In Integral Theory, “radically inclusive” means the ability to see the All in all, without failing to differentiate the real “this world” levels of development that distinguish people.

⁹ From the poem “New Face”, by Alice Walker, in *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*, 1991: http://www.sex-geek.com/Poems/new_face.html retrieved on January 16, 2005.

¹⁰ Here’s a show stopper to illuminate the gendered skew of sexual function research: current statistics indicate that consumers spend 1 billion dollars annually in Viagra sales—the leading drug for male erectile dysfunction. (Sources: http://www.forbes.com/2003/10/06/cx_mhal_1006matchup.html, retrieved 9/28/04; <http://www.fool.com/news/commentary/2003/commentary031126am.htm?source=EDNWFT>, retrieved 9/28/04.) This is as compared to an annual expenditure of 519 million annually, in Arimidex sales—the leading drug for early breast cancer prevention. (Source: <http://www.astrazeneca.ch/corp-news-2004-01-30->



[fronthalfannualresults2003.pdf](#), retrieved 9/28/04). Perhaps this indicates a gendered valuation of some erectile/erogenous zones as more worthy than others of our public health attention?

¹¹ For exploration of this important distinction visit the Integral Sexuality and Gender Studies Center online at www.integraluniversity.org.

¹² HIV mortality has decreased approximately 70 percent since 1995, but remains the 5th leading cause of death, as of 2002, for people ages 25-44. (Source: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/04news/infantmort.html>, retrieved 9/28/04).



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