

Review: *Integral Voices on Sex, Gender and Sexuality: Critical Inquiries* ed. Vanessa Fisher & Sarah Nicholson

As a follow-up to Sarah Nicholson's "The Evolutionary Journey of Woman: From the Goddess to Integral Feminism", Sarah and Vanessa Fisher have edited a volume of essays – "Integral Voices on Sex, Gender and Sexuality: Critical Inquiries" – which opens up debate around integral approaches to these issues in a highly useful and frequently provocative fashion. As Sean Esbjörn Hargens notes in the Foreword, such issues are both 'extremely personal and profoundly philosophical', and indeed I have both noticed strong emotional reactions to a few of the ideas put forward and been a little stretched philosophically on a few issues as I read through. A volume of this sort can be regarded as a kind of 'integral workout' for the mind and emotions which, if engaged positively, can really deepen insight and facilitate self-development. This review is a report of how that has been for me with this book.

Fisher and Nicholson's introduction leads in very well, setting out the territory, the history and the inherent tensions in the project of the collection very well, and for me focuses helpfully on the issue of *functionalist* versus *critical/conflict* views on sex and gender. I will have more to say about this later, but basically this opposition characterises theories as either tending to implicitly endorse existing ideological, social and political structures by interpreting each 'part' in society as playing a role in allowing the society to 'function' as a whole, whereas critical/conflict views tend to see parts as in 'continual interplays of power relations'. Two of the essays in particular exemplify this latter tendency – both, interestingly from my perspective, written by men and also the only essays where I have major criticisms, of which more later. Here I will only note, in agreement with Fisher and Nicholson's own stated hope of an ultimate integration of 'dichotomous positions', that the opposition between functionalism and critical approaches practically cries out, more than almost any other I can think of, to be transcended in a synthesis which sees critique and conflict as immanent in an expanded understanding of functional role which no longer merely allows the theorist to endorse the status quo, either explicitly or implicitly. Integral evolutionary understandings are, or should be, exemplars of this kind of theorising. Not seeing them that way, as some critics apparently don't, should be an indication either that the critic fails to understand the theory properly or that it is insufficiently integral and evolutionary. Which it is in particular cases will prove to be a critical issue.

The first chapter is Nicholson's own exposition of feminist theory from the 'First Wave' starting with Mary Wollstonecraft and running through to the suffragettes, on through the Second and Third Waves to Integral Feminism. Much of this chapter is a précis of some of the key content of Nicholson's own book, which I have already reviewed elsewhere. I have not however commented there on the various feminist philosophies Nicholson expounds in the lead up to integral feminism, some of which I find rather conceptually confused. For instance, there seems to me to be a conceptual confusion tending to equate materialism with non-duality in Elizabeth Grosz's ideas. As well, I find myself wondering whether in some cases we could not substitute 'Man' or 'Human Being' for 'Woman' throughout, and make essentially the same points. What is it about the feminist philosophies of Grosz or Rosi Braidotti, for instance, that makes them specifically about women? I'm

not sure I see it here. Nevertheless Nicholson cannot be held responsible for such apparent failings, and it is a considerable achievement to provide such an exposition of such disparate ideas in such a restricted space. My only other comment is that I would not want to claim, as she does, that the failings of 'Wilberian Integral Theory' are 'demonstrated' by all of the essays in the volume that she mentions, as I think one or two at least have not really made their case very well. I turn to one of these now.

The title of R. Michael Fisher's essay – '(Are) Men Tragically Hopeless (?)' – is no doubt intentionally provocative. My immediate response was 'Of course not! Why would you want to raise such a question?' I have to say that I had trouble coming to a settled view about this essay, and had to read it three or four times before I felt that I had sufficiently separated my (decidedly negative) emotional reaction to it, and whatever that might say about me, from the content. I note as well that there is much in it that I agree with. Nevertheless, what stands out most for me is that he finds many if not most of the men he has had to do with, including many who have attended his men's workshops and groups, to be a great disappointment. If I had such an experience, I would have to wonder whether my expectations were reasonable, rather than suggesting that those men might be in some sense 'hopeless', far less 'tragically hopeless'. What, for example, is actually wrong with 'relying on women for emotional intimacy' if it isn't pathological co-dependency, which it need not be?

Worse than this, though, is the gruesome metaphor, elaborated throughout the essay, of men falling from a great height into a net set one inch from the pavement. I cannot regard this as a useful contribution. *In what sense* are men in this dire freefall (i.e. what are the real world experiences which constitute it) and does he really think that all men are in this helpless/hopeless predicament? I don't see adequate answers to these questions. I can, however, suggest why Mr Fisher resorts to such rhetoric, and it is a theme which underlies other contributions to the volume, principally that of Joseph Gelfer.

The underlying theme is, I suggest, the idea that men in general are holding out intentionally on ceding social and political power to women, including many of those, like Mr Fisher's former men's group colleagues, who would seem otherwise to be relatively aware and progressive. This idea is frequently glossed as the persistence of patriarchy, no doubt in disguised or modified forms. There is no getting around the fact that this is a major bone of contention in this space, and it needs to be foregrounded squarely so as to be properly assessed, rather than covertly assumed. Is it true as stated? I would say that it is not, though there are very important related truths which make it seem plausible or even obvious to many. I will get to some of these later, but now I would like to discuss an action Mr Fisher enjoins on men which I think is highly revealing about this underlying idea, and some reasons why the action is not generally appropriate.

It is this: "...get down off your high horse, on your knees in front of the women you respect, and tell them that they can take over now, and you will be there as allies to assist them in any way they need to become liberation leaders". This injunction assumes several things, one of which is that the man in question is in possession of significant social and/or political power that they *could* cede to someone else. Another is that they know women whom they respect who have the current capability and desire to be 'liberation leaders'. A third assumption is that it is appropriate that the relevant power relations go from 'male up/female down' to 'female up/male down', rather than equality. The first two assumptions *could* be correct for particular men, and I am the last to deny

that such an action may be appropriate for some. I cannot be convinced, however, that they are general truths for all men. I do not seem to have any significant social or political power, for instance, and nor do most of the men I know, and I'm afraid the female candidates for 'liberation leader' seem to be very thin on the ground as well. Nor is simply reversing the apparent power relations in society so that the women are in charge any kind of general solution to sexist oppression as far as I can see, even apart from the dismal prospects of it happening. Mr Fisher attributes the 'half-hearted' reactions he has had to this injunction to 'male ego' and 'particular sexist codependent power-relations and internalised oppression'. I think it more likely that the men have been indistinctly aware that the idea is somehow 'off' but lacked either the critical capacity or the courage of their convictions to challenge it.

In conclusion, I also note that this essay takes much of its inspiration from a version of 'critical integralism' which considers the standard versions of Wilber, Beck and co. insufficiently attentive to the dynamics of oppression in the world. I'm not sure how much such a critique can really be made out, given that Wilber, at least, is explicit at many places about the need to avoid oppressive relations (e.g. 'transcend and include' rather than 'transcend and repress'). The real issue is, I think, precisely about what relations are really oppressive. For example, as mentioned before, is it really sexist and oppressive for a man to rely on a woman for emotional intimacy, per se? I hardly think so, in general, though no doubt a lot of men (and women) would benefit from greater emotional flexibility and range. A final idea floated by this essay is that we, as men, are 'not in control'. Well, many of us never actually thought we were. Like many women, though, we do aspire to more effective control over our own lives. In the end, we are not the relatively small clique of men (and very small indeed clique of women) who *do* have lots of social and political control, so applying a critique to us that only really bites for them has little or no real resonance. We don't need to bleed to make further progress.

The third chapter is 'A Deep Integral View on the Future of Gender', by Elizabeth Debold. I am tempted to simply endorse this chapter as a beautiful exposition of the subject and move on, but something must be said further. I appreciate her insistence that 'to move toward the integration inherent in integral, we women must move beyond postmodern ideas about gender, identity politics and perhaps even a bit of pride so that we can transform the divisions of modernity and create a new culture'. The analysis of those postmodern gender ideas is prominent in some of the later essays, particularly the sophisticated contribution by Rebecca Bailin, and Debold provides us with a very useful historical, psychological and philosophical overview of the subject as a lead in. A particularly important point that she makes is that the notion of gender – masculine or feminine – is a *modern* invention – 'The interior sense of masculine and feminine identity emerges in Modernity'. This has the implication that ascribing masculine or feminine identities to pre-modern societies, such as the so-called 'Great Goddess' cultures, cannot help but be misleading. Our gender categories are historically emergent, make sense only in the light of that history and most definitely are not fixed for all time, which is very good news in terms of human liberation!

Speaking of liberation from gender roles, Giles Herrada's chapter on 'The Mysterious Fate of Homosexuality' also does a masterful job of making sense of the history of homosexuality from prehistory through classical times to the present. No other topic around sex and gender is more wrapped in confusion, myth (especially 'Sodom and Gomorrah'), prejudice, suppression, oppression and outright bloody injustice, and Herrada deploys deep and subtle scholarship to making sense of it

all, when on the surface many aspects make none. One major conclusion: ‘...the acceptance or rejection of homosexual behaviour does not correlate with the dominant intellectual discourse of a given society, but rather with its positive or negative depiction in the prevailing *mythos*’. Various things are seen to follow from this, including a plea for homosexuals to reclaim authorship of their history, move beyond victimisation and refashion their vision of themselves using the integral conceptual framework.

Terry H. Hildebrandt provides a very good example of how such conceptualisation might look in the next chapter: ‘An Integral Map of Sexual Identity’. Gender is reconceptualised ‘as a continuum, rather than as binary’, which is ‘able to embrace human sexual diversity in all its forms and expressions’ – a challenging task that he tackles ably in a small compass. In the process he provides a useful discussion of the opposing idea of *essentialism* and *social constructivism* as applied to sexual identity, and particularly in relation to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual or intersex (LGBTI). Sexual orientation is then conceptualized and measured using the integral four quadrants and four dimensions of sexual identity due to Kelly Winters. This provides, I think, a useful framework for further work.

The following chapter is bound to excite rather more debate – here Ken Wilber and leading author on men’s issues Warren Farrell discuss ‘Gender Issues without Men: An Oxymoron?’ I have seen another review which describes this material as ‘regressive’, and I cannot agree. I encourage everyone to read this discussion and make up their own minds. What I can say from this and my reading of some of Farrell’s other work, particularly *The Myth of Male Power*, is that he frequently captures, in a particularly powerful way, many aspects of typical male experience which seldom, if ever, get much airing in the feminist literature, no doubt because much of that material is understandably focussed heavily on typical female experiences. Indeed, Farrell’s work is capable of evoking considerable anger at how conventional society radically short-changes men, stunting their personal growth and not infrequently incapacitating them or killing them way before their time. None of this should be used (as is not infrequently the case) as ammunition in a competition for which sex or gender is most victimised by society – that is very far from the point. The point is that conventional societal and political arrangements are not, as is frequently claimed, implicitly or otherwise, some sort of vast conspiracy of men in general against women. If they were, the vast majority of men would do very much better from them than they do! Wilber and Farrell point this up very strongly, and I recommend close and repeated readings of this chapter for those who have initial strong negative reactions to what they are saying.

Rebecca Bailin’s essay ‘Feminine, Masculine, Female and Male in the Integral Space’ would also repay close re-reading. I am particularly impressed by how Bailin surfaces apparent inconsistencies in how Wilber and others in the integral space sometimes talk about sex and gender, then goes on to provide a harmonised reading via a sophisticated developmental conceptualisation of gender. I cannot do her treatment justice in a summary – the reader is encouraged to engage in a close reading of the essay, which will hopefully disclose why I reserve it such high praise! Using apparent inconsistencies in the work of integral thought leaders as occasions for deeper investigation rather than destructive critique is an approach not favoured by some, however. The next essay is an unfortunate case in point.

Rather more than R. Michael Fisher's essay which I critiqued earlier, I have deep problems with Joseph Gelfer's 'Integral Spirituality or Masculine Spirituality?' There is no doubt that the author has read widely in integral theory, but the tone and approach of the essay is negative and debunking, in a way that I find very unhelpful. Digging deeper and suggesting a way forward that does the author as much justice as possible, as Bailin does, is not Gelfer's way. His intent is to surface and denounce something that he is pleased to call 'masculine spirituality', which he sees as implicit in the work of Wilber and others, and diagnostic of patriarchal attitudes. I think that much of what Gelfer thinks he sees is a mirage born of a flawed conceptual scheme and decidedly uncharitable critical methods.

The flaws in the conceptual scheme can be seen from how Gelfer opens his essay – he defines 'masculine spirituality' as 'concerned with articulations of masculinity and spirituality that are appropriate for and resonate with men', which is to my mind a fairly vacuous definition, for it doesn't tell us much more about the subject than the label does, apart from seeming to assume that there are such 'articulations' which are common to all or most men, and presumably *not* widespread among women (dubious assumptions in themselves, I would have thought). He then almost immediately warns us that however innocuous such a definition might seem, 'the unfortunate reality is that masculine spirituality more often than not perpetuates a thinly veiled patriarchal spirituality that does not seek to complement feminine spirituality, but rather oppress it, either actively or unwittingly'. I note here the incoherent idea of 'unwittingly seeking to oppress', and things don't get much better as we read further. Immediately the mythopoeic men's movement is convicted, without trial, of 'promoting an oppressive and singular masculinity' via the neo-Jungian archetypes, and then the Christian men's movement in a similar vein. Whether there is any real justice in these charges is not really Gelfer's concern to demonstrate – his real aim is to show that the integral movement, via particularly Ken Wilber, David Deida and Warren Farrell, is also guilty of covert patriarchy via masculine spirituality.

He has several lines of attack. The first is to claim that the masculine and feminine 'types' that Wilber talks about are in fact rather *stereotypes* and fall prey to Wilber's own pre-trans fallacy, a case of 'elevationism' akin to the Jungian archetypes. Following on from this is Wilber's apparent denial of the reality of patriarchy, resulting in 'reluctance to accept certain types of feminism' – especially ecofeminism - and a resulting 'privileging of the masculine mode' which subtly reinforces the patriarchy he denies. Finally there is the charge of Wilber's 'masculinist style'.

This last charge, which involves interrogating the language used by Wilber and others so as to discern an underlying attitude that can then be characterised as 'oppressive', is much the weakest, very uncharitable and also yields in places some rather ludicrous pronouncements. Because Gelfer's definition of 'masculine spirituality' is so lacking in real content, he needs to point to additional characteristics to fill it out then argue that these are somehow oppressive. Thus we have the (to me) ridiculous suggestion borrowed from William Irwin Thompson that Wilber seeks to "control the universe through mapping" and objections to the use of technological metaphors ('integral operating system') and to the idea that the integral perspective can be regarded as a 'view from 50,000 feet'. Gelfer is just embarrassing himself here. How could an integral approach not embrace technology and 'big picture' perspectives, if only to 'transcend and include' them? How often does Wilber have to point out that the map is not the territory, and if anyone else has a better map, he wants to know about it? If a predilection for such things is 'masculine' so be it, but it is nothing to object to.

As to masculine and feminine types being stereotypes falling prey to the pre-trans fallacy, I am content to let the dialectic work through in the way that Bailin maps out for us. Gender, as opposed to sex, turns out to be a tricky notion, highly culturally conditioned and moreover less important in many ways as we develop, but nevertheless a polarity that we need to deal with, else why the need for books like this one? Gelfer's approach - to use his critique as a way to motivate suspicion of an underlying patriarchal conspiracy - ultimately lacks credibility as well as coherence. The major central charge goes exactly to this issue of patriarchy, of course, and I want to round out my discussion by briefly addressing Wilber's approach to the issue and the whole idea of it.

Gelfer charges Wilber with denying the reality of patriarchal oppression by arguing that men and women have always 'co-created' the various systems of production and governance for reasons related closely to needs of survival and reproduction over the ages, and that some societies and cultures were or are more 'patrifocal' than 'patriarchal'. Personally I do feel that Wilber probably overstates his case here - by the time we get into proper 'mythic-rational' society, such as Rome, patriarchy is definitely with us. By the time that rational thought starts to get serious purchase in the Axial Age, ideologies that give women an inferior place in society and culture become evident (e.g. in the thought of Aristotle), and these were perpetuated and elaborated over at least the next 2,000 years. Because ideology is essentially backwards-looking, justifying *post hoc* already existing states of affairs, there is no doubt that these attitudes had already taken hold by that stage. It is highly significant that those attitudes only began to really shift in the late modern period, when post-ideological thought, of which integralism is, in my contention at least, an advanced paradigm case, starts to become a serious cultural influence. At the same time, ideological modes only retreat quite gradually, so fundamentalists like the Promise Keepers (to whom Gelfer tries to link integralism quite unconvincingly) will be around for a while yet, I'm afraid.

Nevertheless, I would like to make it crystal clear that patriarchal thinking has never been, and certainly is not now, some kind of general conspiracy of men against women, either conscious or (whatever that might mean) unconscious. Ideologists understand their ideology as a description of *how the world actually is*, so it is less a conspiracy than a set of perceptions - inaccurate of course, but convincing to the perceivers. Consequently any patriarchal hold-overs at present will be among those, like Christian fundamentalists, who are still embedded in world-views which have structural masculine dominator hierarchies. Gelfer tries to suggest that something similar is true with Wilber's version of integralism, since, quite apart from whether 'patriarchy' ever strictly existed or exists, Wilber argues that the issue of women's liberation could only arise once the 'noosphere' (to use Teilhard de Chardin's term) arose during the Axial Age, and Gelfer thinks this is 'erasing male domination from history'. In this Gelfer is implicitly employing a very non-evolutionary attitude to consciousness in human history and refusing to see that integralism is the *least likely* context to truly harbour patriarchal attitudes. If Wilber's version is not entirely defensible that is not a symptom of a general patriarchal malaise but of the need for incremental critique and adjustments, in the way Bailin shows us. More could be said about approaches like Gelfer's, but I think this is more than enough for now!

I have very little to say about Barbara Bickel's 'Led by the Spirit of Art: A Spiritual Feminist Arts-Based Inquiry', other than she seems to be pursuing her art with considerable integrity and I appreciate the openness to the positive presence and reality of both sexes in her work. I want to finish this very

long review with a brief appreciation of the last two chapters – on sexual harassment and sex education - and a short wrap-up.

It is always a pleasure to encounter the work of Diane Musho Hamilton, and her conversation with Vanessa Fisher on 'Evolving Our Approach to Sexual Harassment: A New Role for Women' is no exception. Their discussion of the history of sexual harassment legislation and rules in the USA is highly instructive, both about the great advances that have been made in protecting women from horrendous sexual exploitation that has been going on for a long time, and about how 'a certain heightened victim consciousness', which actually disempowers women, has opened up as a shadow side. I cannot do this deeply informed and nuanced discussion justice here - I encourage everyone to read it and be enlightened. I say the same about the final essay in the volume - 'An Integral Approach to Sexuality Education' by Michele J. Eliason and John P. Elia. Everything they say about the woeful and frequently rather disastrous history of sex education in the USA is mirrored, in my memory at least, in practices in Australia. For everyone's sake, male, female or otherwise, God grant that their lessons and recommendations are widely read and heeded!

In conclusion, I can say that I wholeheartedly recommend this volume as a very useful entree indeed to integral sex and gender theory. I find most of the chapters very helpful, and where, as is very evident above, I do not, I believe that the underlying ideas and attitudes need to be very vigorously and rigorously examined and evaluated. Indeed, as some of these are very much abroad in the general intellectual climate this process cannot in practice be avoided. May this review stimulate it further!

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