



7-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Hartelius, G. (2016). Taylor's soft perennialism: A primer of perennial flaws in transpersonal scholarship. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 35 (2). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies/vol35/iss2/5>



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Taylor's Soft Perennialism: A Primer of Perennial Flaws in Transpersonal Scholarship

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This response to Taylor's essay in this issue (p. 17) concludes that his notion of soft perennialism is unworkable and shows no promise as a theory to explain spiritual diversity. Numerous specific shortcomings of the paper are described, then it is used as basis for identifying three broad categories of error that occur in some transpersonal scholarship. Examples from Taylor's paper are supplemented with similar errors in papers by other transpersonal scholars.

Keywords: *Steve Taylor, soft perennialism, metaphysics, spirituality, phenomenology, state of consciousness, participatory thought, pervasive consciousness, nondual, critical thinking*

From its inception transpersonal psychology has been bedeviled by a tension between on the one hand, scientific and scholarly approaches that diminish the value of mystical, spiritual, and exceptional human experiences, and on the other, uncritical speculations invented to support the importance of these dimensions of the person. More than one luminary in the field has forged a reputation by penning an array of popular books with appealing but inadequately or even poorly founded notions, typically accompanied by a few scholarly articles published in holistically oriented psychology journals that give a semblance of credence to their work. Given that transpersonal psychology has been in a preliminary phase of development in which various frameworks and constructs have been tried out, the field has rightly given some leeway to these explorations.

The pages of transpersonal journals deserve to be used to critically vet and winnow these ideas in the process of building a field that demonstrates substantive value and integrity. Such processes, though less common than might be desired, are already present within transpersonal scholarship—beginning perhaps in the mid-1990s with critiques of Wilber's work (e.g., Ferrer, 1998, 2002, 2009; Rothberg & Kelly, 1998; Wright, 1995, 1996). In concert with these have been calls for more careful approaches to philosophy (e.g., Ferrer, 2002), science (e.g., Friedman, 2002; MacDonald, 2013; Walach, 2013), and method (Berkhin & Hartelius, 2011; Friedman, 2013; Hartelius, 2007, 2014). The current response to Taylor's paper is offered in this constructive critical spirit.

Taylor's (2016, this issue) essay on *soft perennialism* is a worthy effort to advance the field, even if its primary contribution is to illustrate that its particular approach is wholly unworkable and shows no future promise. There are aspects he gets right, most notably his call for basing transpersonal scholarship in empirical, phenomenological research rather than philosophy, and suggesting that experiences reported as spiritual awakening should be compared with quite similar accounts of processes that occur outside of spiritual or religious contexts. Taylor also noted correctly that a number of early transpersonal scholars held perennialist views, reviewed relevant critiques of Wilber's (e.g., 2000) perennialist model, and affirmed observations that Wilber's work retains the features of perennialism even though Wilber (2006) himself has disavowed some aspects of the approach. All of this reflects the presence of some critical thought and analysis, which are much needed in these areas of study.

Unfortunately, Taylor has not heeded his own advice as he engaged his topic. Instead, he has put forward a heavily philosophical and metaphysical viewpoint, then twisted and turned to disavow the clearly metaphysical nature of his position. He has claimed that his is a perennial phenomenology rather than a perennial philosophy, yet in his phenomenological research he demonstrates a blindness to his own interpretive lens. Analysis of qualitative data is a subjective process in which the researcher needs to disclose biases in favor of particular interpretations, strive to set these biases

aside, and perhaps seek review of the analysis by others with expertise in either the topic or in qualitative research; rather than reporting such disclosures and validation procedures in his research (Taylor, 2012a, 2012b), Taylor (2016) has instead claimed that evidence for his pre-existing opinions emerged naturally out of the phenomenological data. This is an alarmingly unreflective claim that places even the validity of his empirical work in serious question.

Equally disquieting is Taylor's opinion that only a perennialist theory can account for similarities of experience between individuals in different cultural contexts. This seems to belie a lack of acquaintance with basic notions of psychology, namely that a woman in rural Kentucky may experience loneliness in a way that is quite resonant with how it is felt by a woman who works in a high government position in Kuala Lumpur, because humans share quite similar DNA and physiology. An explanation that relies on neuroscience and phenomenology rather than on belief in some sort of pervasive consciousness that is claimed to be the basis of all existence, seems both more parsimonious and more credible.

Rather than focusing solely on the limitations of Taylor's paper, what may be of greater value is to consider three types of problematic assumption and argument that appear within it, and illustrate how these also occur in writings of other transpersonal scholars. In this way, Taylor's work may serve as a sort of primer for somewhat common fallacies and limitations in transpersonal scholarship.

Out of Thin Air:

Metaphysical Assertions

A common problem in transpersonal scholarship is the presence of unacknowledged metaphysical concepts. Some such instances are obvious. For example, it is clear to any fair reader that Wilber's (e.g., 2000, 2006) notion of a nondual ultimate is metaphysical. The nondual is by Wilber's definition the ultimate source of all reality, the paper upon which any form is written (Wilber, 2006). As such, it is beyond any of its manifestations such as sense experience or a mind that might perceive such experience. Such an ultimate would seem by definition to be transcendent beyond any formal method that might wish to verify its presence.

Yet Wilber's nondual is metaphysical not because it is transcendent—that is, beyond conventional

physical reality—it is metaphysical because Wilber has made an unfalsifiable claim about the ultimate nature of reality. The term metaphysical derives from *meta ta physica*, referring to one of Aristotle's works that speculated on being, existence, and first principles (Gifford, 2015)—in other words, on the true nature of reality. A more common contemporary understanding is that metaphysics refers to subjects that cannot be examined scientifically. Wilber's nondual is metaphysical in both of these senses.

While a nondual ultimate is difficult to imagine, let alone experience, metaphysical claims can also be made about physical objects, or about sensate experiences. A claim that the Empire State Building is the tallest building in New York City is demonstrably false; a claim that it is at the center of the universe is a metaphysical claim because there is no way to determine whether or not this is the case. The fact that the building can be seen and touched and ascended by elevator does not in any way lessen the metaphysical nature of this claim, for in order to be true this implies that the universe must have a finite, measurable size, and that it must be centered on New York City. While few New Yorkers would dispute the latter point, both are claims about the cosmos that are untestable.

Other authors such as Taylor (2016) and Blackstone (2006) have similarly inserted metaphysical claims about the nature of reality. For example, Taylor's (2016) model proposes that there is an

all-pervading spiritual force that constitutes the essence of one's being and of everything else that exists. ...

Spiritual experiences occur ... when one transcends the separateness and automatized perception of one's normal state of being, and experiences a world that is radiantly alive with spirit-force, and sense that one shares their being with everything around and with the force itself. (p. 34)

Taylor seems to believe that because this force is immanent rather than transcendent, and linked to sensate experience, that his claim is not a metaphysical one. Yet the claim that a pervasive spirit-force constitutes the essence of reality is a metaphysical assertion, whether or no Taylor intends it to be so. One might collect reports from individuals who have experienced the world as if it is radiantly alive with spirit-force, but even if this spirit-force could be measured, this would not be evidence

that spirit-force is the essence of one's being or of all the world.

A notably similar claim has been made by Blackstone (2006) regarding

the experience of a subtle, all-pervasive expanse of consciousness pervading one's internal and external experience as a unified whole. The Asian teachings that describe this type of nondual experience consider this subtle consciousness to be the essence of being. (p. 27)

In recent published dialogue with Blackstone (2016, this issue), she has stated that "I do not claim in my writing or teaching to understand either the nature of consciousness or the structure of reality. I do not teach a philosophy or a metaphysical system." However that may be, the suggestion that a subtle experience of pervasive nondual consciousness is the essence of being is, as with Wilber and Taylor, an unfalsifiable assertion about the foundational nature of reality—and as such it is a metaphysical assertion.

It is probably not possible to remove all metaphysical assumptions from any context, including science. However, these are particularly problematic when they are unconscious, unacknowledged, or even denied, and especially when they are central to a particular idea or line of argument. Transpersonal scholars would do well to gain a clear understanding of what metaphysical assumptions look like, to identify them when they are used, to offer some explanation for why a metaphysical stance seems called for or perhaps unavoidable in a given context, and to acknowledge the vulnerabilities inherent in metaphysical claims.

Slippery Equivalency: Conflating Experienced States with Metaphysical Claims

A closely related problem concerns the conflation of experiential states with statements about what those experiences are supposed to mean. A personal anecdote may serve to illustrate the issue.

When I was in my twenties, I went by myself to a local holistic fair. A man in one of the exhibit booths sat at a bare table wearing odd yellow-hued goggles. His appearance and the fact that he did not seem to have any product to sell piqued my curiosity. He told me he taught people how to soul travel, and invited me to a free class that was to take place a couple of weeks later. When

I arrived at the class there were perhaps twenty others, many of whom seemed to be regular students. We went through an induction, then sat quietly with eyes closed, observing whatever images appeared in imagination. Then each person took a turn sharing what they saw. One individual said she saw herself as a blue ball, with other blue balls around her, and there was a golden ball that came over and pricked her. "That means I am your teacher," the man with the yellow goggles informed her. Over the next half hour I figured out that this man was likely making a six-figure income running nightly classes in his home and interpreting the imagery of suggestible individuals. I did not return.

When a person is told that if they have such-and-such experience, it means some particular thing, then if they have that experience, they may simply accept without question that it means what they have been told it means. Yet an experience in and of itself has no particular meaning; it is context that provides meaning. The same epithet may have a very different impact if it is shouted by a police officer with a gun, or if it is screamed from the stage by a comedian.

Wilber's work (e.g., 2006) can be taken to mean that the nondual is the ultimate reality, and that a nondual state of consciousness is a direct and confirming experience of this ultimate reality. Yet even in a simple embodied state the conventional divide between subject and object is shifted, softened, even dissolved (Hartelius, 2015a; Hartelius & Goleman, 2016); such an experience need not be taken to mean that one has touched ultimate reality or the essence of existence, or anything other than a moderately shifted state of mind. Experiencing a state that could be described as nondual does not affirm Wilber's intuition about the structure of the cosmos.

Taylor (2016) has a similar approach, claiming that the all-pervading spiritual force "is not a metaphysical speculation, but can be experienced as a tangible reality" (p. 31). Here a slippery equivalency is made between a particular experience and a particular metaphysical claim. Allegedly, if one feels some quality of presence through oneself and one's surroundings, then this means that there is an all-pervading spiritual force that is the essence of being. Of course, an experience of this type may be valued, but it does not necessarily mean any such thing about the essence of being.

Blackstone (2006) has made a quite similar claim, suggesting that feeling consciousness as a subtle pervasive expanse of space in and around the body

represents realizing nondual consciousness as one's own nature. Here again a specific phenomenal experience is taken as evidence for a particular metaphysical claim about the nature of reality, which is entirely unwarranted. (For a more detailed discussion see the Editor's Response in Blackstone, 2016 [this issue]).

An additional example of highly questionable equivalency is Forman (1999)—cited by Taylor (2016)—who has claimed that experiences in which awareness has no object reflect *pure consciousness*, and has suggested that these events may provide evidence of a Wilber-style ultimate reality. Yet such experiences could just as easily be termed *empty consciousness*, which offers quite different connotations. Here again, there is a bold assertion that a particular kind of experience validates some metaphysical claim about reality. In fact many other interpretations of such experiences are also possible, and metaphysical claims remain undemonstrable.

Perhaps consciousness is the source and fabric of reality; this possibility cannot be denied or disproven. Indeed, some have claimed that a kind of pervasive nonlocal consciousness may be the only way to explain various human capacities (e.g., Schwartz, 2015). Yet other explanations may still emerge—and even if it were possible to demonstrate that nonlocal consciousness does somehow extend through space, this does not mean that consciousness is the primary fabric of reality, nor that it extends through all of the universe. Furthermore, the ability of conscious to extend over distances would not mean that the experience of something that seems to be presence or consciousness in the space around one's body is actually the same phenomenon that extends over distances, rather than something else more local to the person.

Even more central is the fact that in a context where critical thinking is applied, a personal experience cannot be used to validate a metaphysical claim. When such a claim is advanced together with the advertisement that "you can feel it for yourself," the "it" that can be felt is not proof of the metaphysical claim. As noted, the fact that one can physically experience the Empire State Building is not evidence for a claim that it is at the center of the universe. The simple yet notable shifts in state of consciousness that occur when the experience of conscious attending drops down from the head into the body (Hartelius & Goleman, 2016), while likely beneficial, should not be reified or obscured by outsized claims about their meaning.

Leading the Witness:

Improper Use of Sources

Wilber has been repeatedly criticized for appropriating a wide variety of ideas without crediting his sources; however, this issue is well enough established that it deserves no more than passing mention here. With Taylor (2016) the issue is use of inadequate sources, and with Blackstone (2006) there is uncritical interpretation of textual material.

One of Taylor's (2016) arguments for his soft perennialism is that Ferrer's participatory thought is too relativistic to account for similarities between spiritual traditions. Participatory models are relational rather than relativistic, but since even relativism puts no bounds on possibilities for similarity, what Taylor may have meant is that if there are significant similarities, only a perennialist approach provides a satisfactory meaning frame. While arguments based on personal preference for certain explanations generally do not carry great weight, the issue here is that in order to demonstrate how similar awakening experiences are among a variety of traditions, Taylor (2016) has cited a very few authors such as Spencer, Stace, Eliade, Levy-Bruhl, Turnbull, Underhill, Happold, and Suzuki, who, through their sympathetic ideological leanings, have already interpreted their data through a homogenizing lens that fits with Taylor's thinking—an inadequate basis for evidence because the sources consulted confirm the biases of the author.

For Blackstone (2006), the concern is that she has relied on translations of textual materials from several different traditions, and then compared these with each other and with her own experiential descriptions. Even descriptions from another contemporary culture need to be considered within their own context in order to ensure that a Western scholar's understanding of them is accurate. When the source of description is translated ancient texts from another culture, what appears to be a description of experience may instead be metaphor or poetic language, or even esoteric symbolism. Without careful attention to obtaining an appropriate and critical translation, and review by a scholar knowledgeable in the particular text and culture, opportunities for misinterpretation are too many to disregard. (For a more detailed discussion see Hartelius, 2015b).

The work of Wilber, Taylor, and Blackstone all contain ideas and descriptions worthy of attention. However, when scholarly sources are omitted, or selected

or used without proper care, the credibility of the associated ideas is damaged.

Balancing Innovation with Critical Thinking

Scientific skeptics are often all too ready to dismiss reports of exceptional human capacities and experiences as irrational belief. Those in more holistic approaches to psychology, on the other hand, may be too ready to accept metaphysical assertions, to believe that some experiential state is evidence for such assertions, or to rely on substandard means for gathering evidence to support such ideas. Just as healthy skepticism should not imply prejudice or rejection, so sympathetic curiosity should not imply uncritical acceptance.

The errors illustrated here are not the only ones found in transpersonal scholarship, but they reflect failings that occur more frequently than ought to be the case in the literature of the field. The purpose of pointing out these issues is encouragement toward more careful scholarship and better research, rather than censure. As with any scholarly field, a balance should be found between allowing multiple, innovative, and sometimes unorthodox voices to speak, and identifying inadequacies in scholarship that could be remedied with additional care.

Taylor's (2016) soft perennialism is a notion that likely has too many inadequacies to be of any real use other than perhaps as a metaphor of how participants in various spiritual traditions might be thought of as exploring different parts of a shared landscape. This metaphor does not translate well into psychological theory, and it is unfortunate that Taylor's ideas were not vetted more carefully before being disseminated as a popular book. Those with advanced degrees, and the credibility these degrees confer, have a responsibility to educate their public readers carefully, rather than using public forums to advance ideas that may be appealing to a popular audience but lacking in the soundness that might give them enduring value.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Harris Friedman, Les Lancaster, Jorge Ferrer, and Marie Thouin for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floragades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at www.transpersonalstudies.org, and in print through www.lulu.com (search for IJTS).