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Non-Duality: Not One, Not Two, but Many

Editor's Introduction

When a person has a profound mystical or spiritual encounter, or experiences an exceptional state of consciousness, it is natural to look for a way to understand what has happened. Has anyone else had an experience like this? Should I tell anyone? Am I special? Am I going crazy? Is this a spiritual experience? Should I see a therapist? Should I find a spiritual teacher? What is going on?

One of the valuable roles that a transpersonal psychology can take is in providing the research, scholarship, and education needed to help those who have had such experiences gain perspective and obtain practical guidance in how to hold and integrate non-ordinary events. In my own counseling and educational work I have often found that one of the more beneficial processes is simply affirming the validity of such experiences, and providing context from personal and professional experience. Events in which the sense of self shifts profoundly, the heart feels radiantly expansive, or the relationship with the wider world opens, can transform lives and even communities.

One of the more attractive and challenging notions that has been applied to such experiences within transpersonal psychology is that of nonduality. In the circles of popular spirituality, nonduality is something between a hot new idea and a holy grail: an elevated sacred state or hidden dimension that can perhaps only be pointed at through logic-defying wisdom stories or paradoxical statements, because it transcends rational thought. It is the thread out of which spirituality teachers can weave mind-bending koan-like statements or “crazy wisdom” tales that leave their listeners mystified, intrigued, and coming back for more—perhaps in the hope that this one notion might be the key to understanding it all. Other

than immersion in paradoxical thought, which may itself serve some purpose of loosening one from the habit of reflexively reducing experience to pre-existing mental categories, such versions of nonduality may at times add to the muddle of confusion rather than providing useful, clarifying distinctions.

A simple example can illustrate this matter. Advaita Vedanta is an Indian spiritual system based on a nondual philosophy (cf. Whitfield, 2009). Yet the definition of nonduality within Advaita Vedanta is extremely precise and specific. *Atman*, the inner self of the person, is identical with *brahman*, the Vedantic Self that is pure existence, and limitless consciousness. The Self is the creative source of all, is not subject to time or space, is radically one thing in that it has no parts or dimensions or aspects, and is the only real thing in all of existence. All created things, including time and space, derive their apparent reality from the Self, and the notion that any created thing or aspect or quality possesses any independent reality that does not derive from the Self, is considered illusory. Realizing that one's own inner self—the awareness that remains after every object of awareness is set aside—is in fact the substrate reality of all creation, liberates the seeker from attempting to find satisfaction in the apparent reality of the exterior, sense-accessible world, for the inner self is already the fullness of that which any human desire might seek to obtain.

The term *advaita* means, not two, and refers to the fact that *atman* and *brahman* are not separate; likewise, the created cosmos has no reality that is separate from that of the Vedantic Self. Yet the not-twoness of Advaita Vedanta is subtly different than a philosophy of radical oneness, since the created universe and its Vedantic source are different in the sense that

one constitutes the full and only reality, and the other, though apparent to the senses, enjoys only a borrowed reality.

Though some of the concepts in this vision may seem unconventional at first hearing, it is crucial to note that the language and ideas are not paradoxical but clear, precise, and specific. Equally important to hold in mind is that Advaita Vedanta is a lineage-based spiritual tradition, allegedly passed down from teacher to student from Śhaṅkarācārya in the 8th-9th centuries CE to the present day. The texts of this tradition are not open-source documents intended for speculation by an untrained reader, but cryptic, condensed scripts designed for use by a lineage-trained teacher. There was no Protestant revolution in Advaita Vedanta, in which a laity rose up against a religious hierarchy deemed to be corrupt and repressive, demanding direct access to textual materials so they would be able to read them in their own language and construct their own theological interpretations; importing the expectation that Advaita Vedanta teachings should be open to this sort of re-interpretation by popular nondual and neo-Advaitin teachers could be seen as a sort of cultural appropriation, one that seemingly feels such confidence in the superiority of its own re-interpretations that it is willing to disregard the integrity of an ancient lineage of sacred teaching.

In contrast to the specific teachings of Advaita Vedanta stand some contemporary descriptions of nondual consciousness. Blackstone (2006) has done an excellent job of articulating one version of this position. In a context that specifically invokes Advaita Vedanta in its formulation of the concept of nonduality, the author has gone on to describe an “experience of an unconstructed, nondual dimension of consciousness” (p. 25) that “*pervades the internal space of one’s own body*” (p. 28, emphasis in original) so that one “realizes one’s own nature as all-pervasive space” (p. 29). Yet in Advaita Vedanta space is part of the creation that has no reality of its own, and as such the notion of one’s nature as “all-pervasive space” is foreign and antithetical to the teachings of Advaita Vedanta. The description continues with the claim that “As nondual consciousness, we do not sense ourselves as separate from our experience” (p. 31). In traditional Advaita Vedanta, by contrast, it is necessary to discern between the experienced objects of awareness and the awareness that experiences, and in this process a clear distinction is cultivated between awareness and that which awareness experiences. The state described by Blackstone (2006) may very well be of considerable value

in a therapeutic setting, and this critique should not be taken as devaluing or negating its utility in personal practice or within a therapeutic context; in my personal and professional experience, cultivation of such a state can be important and powerful for a variety of reasons. However, it is clearly not a state that is nondual in a way that is congruent with the teachings of lineage-based Advaita Vedanta. Rather, it might better be characterized as an embodied state in which there is an experience of the interconnectedness of one’s own psyche with the surrounding world. But interconnectedness is not the nondual teaching of Advaita Vedanta, and the precise definition of nonduality within this tradition deserves to be maintained distinct from the very different notion and experience of interconnectedness.

While Blackstone’s (2006) work offers access to a specific and quite possibly beneficial state, some of the popular discourse on nonduality is little more than an immersion in paradoxical language. For example, imagine that I have described nonduality as a transcendent dimension, and nondual states as ones that offer access to this dimension. It would then be necessary to add that, although I have just called it a dimension, nonduality is not a dimension, and it cannot be accessed, because it is neither anywhere nor everywhere, and yet it is never absent. The more mysterious the definition of nonduality, the easier it becomes to claim the superiority and universality of this notion, and argue that every poetic or mystical or spiritual or intuitive expression is pointing to the same thing—even though the referent is not a thing, and if it were a thing it would not be one thing, but it would not be two or more things either—all of which is only a problem because I am trying to use language to point at something that cannot be captured with words. In all of this, it is doubtful that I have conveyed anything of value to a listener, other than an opportunity to experience the cognitive not-knowing that may come from paradoxical statements. While as noted, this may itself be of some modest value, it hardly points at or provides access to the various nondualities of Advaita Vedanta, or Kashmir Shaivism, or Kabbalah, or Sufism, or anything else.

There do seem to be various mystical experiences described within different traditions that can be seen as reflecting the possibility of some larger and less obvious interconnectedness within the world—and this fact seems more than a little important. Yet because it is possible to find *some* congruences between *some* states does not mean that all such states are the same—work in comparative mysticism suggests that they almost certainly are not (cf.

Ferrer, 2002, 2008)—nor does it mean that these states are evidence that a culturally eclectic and paradoxical notion of an invisible transcendent nondual dimension is correct.

The task of coming to a substantive and pragmatic understanding of non-ordinary states of consciousness is a complex one, a task in which it will be as necessary to hold off rushing to simplistic conclusions as it is to reject all such states as deranged. Painting a wide variety of mystical, spiritual, and exceptional states of mind with the broad brush of nonduality, and then holding out this bricolage as evidence for a concept that is by definition beyond evidence, is likely to prove a short-sighted tactic that will backfire on any fields that embrace it. It may sell a lot of popular books, but it is unlikely to offer a durable foundation for the sort of knowledge that will lead to better tools for understanding human potentials or spirituality, or relieving human suffering.

From a philosophical perspective nonduality is a particularly imprecise notion, first because there are many types of dualism, and second because nonduality negates an unspecified dualism in an unspecified way. Cartesian dualism divides between mind and matter, but Plato divided between the temporal physical body and eternal ideals, of which only the intellect could partake; Aristotle rejected ideal forms but divided between the intellect, which in his thought had no bodily organ, and other aspects of the soul that gave form to the body; Aquinas held that soul and body were separable elements of the person; Kant divided between the phenomena that presented themselves to the mind through senses, and the noumena that were the things in themselves, beyond the reach of the mind—and these are only examples of dualism from the European philosophical tradition.

Because dualisms are many, negation of dualism can and does take a similar variety of forms. The contrast between the nonduality of Advaita Vedanta and the interconnectedness experienced in an embodied state of consciousness is just one example of this diversity. Yet even within a tradition such as Buddhism there are multiple conceptions of nonduality (Berkhin & Hartelius, 2011). In philosophy there are likewise numerous systems that reject dualism, but some do so in favor of various types of monism—not two, but one—and others do so in favor of various types of nihilism—not one, not two, but zero. However one might argue for the unity of these ideas within some theoretical ultimate for which there can be no consensual evidence, the fact that argument is taking place means that one is still within the realm where the considerable differences between various forms of

nonduality have a real and pragmatic effect, and where one ignores these distinctions at their hazard.

Rather than riding the wave of uncritical nonduality, transpersonal psychology has the opportunity to bring a critical lens to this popular concept, and cultivate distinctions and discernment. It is this sort of deliberative engagement with the topic that will fuel sustained interest in human spirituality and ward off the backlash that inevitably follows in the wake of shallow popular fads.

In this Issue

The issue begins with an empirical paper by Samuel Root entitled, “Mirror Gazing for Cultural Bereavement: A Mixed-Methods Study into the Impact of a Restricted Sensory Environment Meditation Process (Psychomanteum) on Culture Shock in Expatriates.” This research carries forward the work of Raymond Moody and Arthur Hastings, both of whom recreated a type of mirror-gazing meditation utilized in ancient Greece for the purpose of contacting the deceased. Root’s work is a novel application of this restricted sensory environment to a highly relevant contemporary context: culture shock as experienced by workers who move by choice or necessity to a different culture.

The next paper, by Maria Ekegren and Anna Maria Dåderman, presents research on the efficacy of a leadership training method, originally commissioned by the Swedish government, that finds numerous resonances with transpersonal ideas and values. Titled, “Leadership Intelligence Before and After Participation in UGL Leadership Training,” the study uses the leadership theory of Marika Ronthy, who “defined the concept of leadership intelligence as the sum of SQ (spiritual intelligence), emotional intelligence (EQ), and rational intelligence (RQ)” (p. 24). Leaders who participated in the Understanding Group and Leader (UGL) training showed increased scores in all three of these domains.

Elliot Benjamin’s paper, “Transpersonal Psychology and an Agnostic Experiential Exploration of Mediumship and the Ostensible Phenomenon of Life after Death,” reports on the researcher’s auto-ethnographic research into evidence of life after death through the work of professional mental mediums who claim to obtain information regarding the deceased. His personal journey, meticulously recorded, makes a compelling if individual case against the validity of such mediumship.

A different type of research is presented by Parisa Shams and Farideh Pourgiv in “The Mariner’s Way of Individuation: An Insight into the Jungian

Principle of Acausality.” Here the narrative of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is offered as a literary exposition of Jung’s principle of synchronicity, a process that illuminates some of the substance of Coleridge’s poem even as it provides metaphorical flesh for Jung’s concept.

The final paper in the general article section is Harris L. Friedman’s thought-provoking paper entitled, “Further Developing Transpersonal Psychology as a Science: Building and Testing Middle-Range Transpersonal Theories.” Friedman argues for the importance of making transpersonal psychology scientific, on the grounds that psychology is a scientific discipline. This paper was adapted from a chapter in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology* (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013).

Beyond the general articles is a fine Special Topic Section on Arts and Consciousness, brought together by guest editors Dorit Netzer and Ted Esser. The volume and richness of material they collected prompted the journal to expand into a double issue in order to be able to include the many inspiring submissions.

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About the Journal

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