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Participatory Transpersonalism: Transformative Relational Process, Not the Structure of Ultimate Reality

Editor's Introduction

It may be a luminous interlude with a beloved, a moment of radiant silence, or ecstatic union with a phrase of music or the wide open world—something larger and more alive than anything imaginable. Time stops, grace descends as a lucent mist, and something within you feels the heart of the world. These moments, however fleeting, sustain the soul; they inspire and help to make life worth living. Yet what do they mean? Perhaps these are merely the side effect of some happenstance chemical event in the brain (cf. Persinger, 2001), and maybe cultural stories of mystical experiences and exceptional capacities are just tales made up to explain suggestion and neural noise.

While it oversimplifies, this dismissiveness is close to much conventional academic stance toward such reports, whether in religious studies or psychology. This attitude is understandable given the difficulty of obtaining empirical evidence for the cognitive value of such experiences. Counter to this position are claims that these experiences open the door to a hidden inner dimension that science and psychology must either dismiss or accept on faith, which takes the topic out of the sphere of scientific inquiry altogether (Friedman, 2002). Yet there may be a way to consider these ephemeral moments with an evidence-based science that neither accepts nor rejects uncritically. To fashion this is a task that a transpersonal approach to psychology may be able to take up (cf. Hartelius, 2014a)—and it is to this end that a careful focus on philosophy is necessary.

Imagine you are standing across from a painting at a museum. You might describe it in ways that someone standing next to you could affirm as accurate, or perhaps supplement with slightly different words: "That is a Rembrandt, a painting showing the bust of a young woman against a dark background, with shadow on part of her face. It looks like she is wearing a pearl necklace." A hundred people might look at the same painting and be able to agree, more or less, with this description.

This is what generally counts as objective knowledge—descriptions of things that pretty much anyone could agree on. This assumes that the world is made of objects, of things that can appear roughly the same to many observers. Yet diaphanous glimpses that seem to lift out of ordinary experience are not concrete things, so they are quietly demoted to the status of subjective daydreams and imagination. Given their power within human experience, however, it seems negligent to dismiss their legitimacy so simply.

Standing in the museum there is a sense in which you are *here*, as observer, and the painting is *there*, on the wall, as an object. In objective knowledge, your personal *hereness* and your relationship with the painting is more or less taken for granted, based on the assumptions that standing in front of a painting is the right way to relate to it and that anyone who was here would see much the same thing. If you were a postmodernist, you might challenge these assumptions by thinking of all the other ways you could be in relationship with the painting: you might invert it or view it through a kaleidoscope, you might take a photo of it, turn the colors wild and alive, cut the image into slices and rearrange them in a way that evokes a throbbing animate force. Or, you might consider that a person not oriented to fine arts might think a "Rembrandt" was a new kind of digital printer, or that a newborn might see only vague patterns of dark and light. All of this play can lead to fresh and creative approaches to the world, and can also be used to deconstruct or reconstruct any piece of information,

leaving no effective consensus and no reliable knowledge (e.g., Rorty, 1979). While postmodern approaches can thus challenge existing orthodoxies and resulting false paradoxes, they are less helpful in developing productive ways of understanding experiences that are already marginalized and poorly understood.

It is for this conundrum that participatory thought within transpersonal psychology (Ferrer, 2002), drawing deeply on feminist thought, seems to offer a way forward. From this standpoint, reality is not objective in the conventional sense that it is separate from me or that I can stand back from it and take it in like a painting on the wall, and yet it is not merely subjective in the sense that it is just something made up in the mind. Reality is actual, real, but you and I are part of it, immersed in it, not observers who can stand back from it and give an objective account; the public space is woven of relationships rather than constructed of separate objects (cf. Thayer-Bacon, 2003, 2010). Reality is being *on* the canvas and *in* the painting, and my relational perspective is necessarily colored by my location (cf. Harding, 1991, 2004).

To apply this to the metaphor of a Rembrandt painting, even if I am able to see the whole painting, it is from the standpoint of a particular location within the painting. If I am situated in what an art historian might describe as the dark background color typical of Rembrandt's work, then the area around me may seem dark, with lighter areas visible elsewhere; if I am located in one of the painted pearls, I might describe the foreground as bright and lustrous, surrounded by dark areas farther out. My situatedness on the painting means I cannot escape the fact that my experience is limited by location, nor the fact that universal knowledge—which implies knowledge either from no specific location (Nagel, 1989) or from a detached location deemed authoritative—is impossible for anyone to attain; however, I can expand my understanding through dialogue and relationship. In fact, the same locatedness that makes universal knowledge unreachable makes relationship both necessary and possible. For this reason a participatory approach foregrounds the values that inform relationship, and holds interest in speculations about universals or ultimates primarily as these represent co-created distillations of their respective value system.

In this sense, participatory thought invites transpersonal psychology to a radical shift of focus away from concern with objective universal truth about transcendent reality, and toward a consideration of how a particular culturally situated vision fosters transformative development of individuals and communities, and cultivates compassion, respect, and symmetrical relationship. It invites an approach to knowledge that holds inclusiveness and diversity not only as preferable and socially moral, but as imperative and indispensable for effective knowledge creation (Hartelius, 2014b). Efforts to reframe participatory thought as yet another iteration of a perennial philosophy, which asserts privileged knowledge about the objective nature of ultimate reality (e.g., Abramson, 2015), fail to grasp the nature of a participatory stance toward the ontological status of any and all visions of ultimacy.

The early field of transpersonal psychology sought to add to humanistic psychology by considering not only the primacy of human experience and relationship, but also the "farther reaches of human nature" (Maslow, 1969, p. 1), including peak experience, transcendent experience, ultimate verities, and transcendent values. Shortly after the inception of the field, Ken Wilber (1975) proposed that all of these aspirations might point toward a transcendent nondual ultimate dimension beyond the dualities of human sense experience—an ultimate that was the ontological source and goal of all human spirituality.

This perennialist philosophy gained wide acceptance within the transpersonal community and remained as a dominant viewpoint (Rothberg, 1986) until challenges by Ferrer (1998, 2002, 2009, 2011a) and others (Hartelius, 2015a; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Rothberg & Kelly, 1998; Schneider, 1987, 1989), and the development of participatory thought as an alternate (Ferrer, 2002; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008), gained considerable influence (Ferrer, 2011b). Critiques of Wilber's (e.g., 2000, 2006) integral theory include concerns that it is metaphysical in the sense that no independent evidence can be mustered to support the primacy of the structure of reality that Wilber asserts, and hierarchical in the sense that ultimate truth claims for one version of reality reduces the status of all other versions; furthermore, it fails to resolve the Cartesian tension that, in a modernist context, devalues mystical, spiritual, and other exceptional experiences as merely subjective constructions.

In response to these and other critiques Wilber (2000, 2006) has attempted to argue that his integral theory has moved away from perennialism and transcended metaphysics. These tactics can be rebutted as ineffectual because they rely on limited definitions of

these terms tailored to suit Wilber's purposes rather than on conventional understandings (Ferrer, 2011a; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Hartelius, 2015a). In a notable recent exchange John Abramson (2014), a proponent of Wilber's integral theory, argued that Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) had misunderstood Wilber's work. After a response by Hartelius (2015a), Abramson's (2015) rejoinder was to abandon his original line of argument and argue instead that participatory was another version of perennialism, with Ferrer's *Mystery* proposed as another instance of Wilber's nondual ultimate.

Many of the shortcomings of this characterization of Ferrer's thought have already been identified in some detail (Hartelius, 2015b), but what deserves further articulation is the fact that a perennialist author such as Abramson employs a type of ontological claim about the nature of ultimate reality that is largely counter to the thrust of participatory thought. This distinction, though conceptually subtle, is central to the dichotomy between participatory and perennialist approaches. It is subtle because participatory thought allows for multiple culturally-situated ontological claims about ultimate reality (e.g., Ferrer, 2011a) just as a perennialist approach does (e.g., Wilber, 2006). The difference is not only in how this apparent tension is resolved, but also and more importantly, in the assumptions that inform a solution.

A perennialist approach considers multiple culturally-situated claims about the nature of reality to be imperfect reflections of an underlying nondual source. This nondual is something that exists in the same way that an object exists in conventional modernist thought: The object exists in itself, without reference to, dependence on, or relationship with any other, whether object or subject (cf. *en soi*, Sartre, 1943); a rock is a rock is a rock, whether it exists at the bottom of a stream or tumbling though interstellar space, or whether it sits on the altar of a meditator. The nondual of integral theory is held to exist in a manner where *existence itself is objective in this way*: this nondual exists in itself, as unchanging source (cf. Wilber, 2006), unaffected by the creation to which it gives rise, or the many traditions that bear it witness.

In participatory thought, however, existence is not self-existent, but relational: The object is not primary, but something that arises, as it were, out of a network of relationships, a sort of intersubjective field. A rock is a rock because I have relationship with it—and it with me—and I simultaneously have relationships within a community where other, similar relationships exist, where the notion and language of "rock" have developed. In other words, an ontological claim within participatory thought is radically different than an ontological claim within a perennialist system because *the very notion of what constitutes existence is different.*

An ontologial claim within participatory thought, then, is a claim about the existence of a particular relationship, or relational field, and the dynamic relational processes that arise within it. If I come to a rock with the needs and actions of a geologist, the process that exists as that relationship may be quite different than if I come as a subsistence tribesperson seeking a tool for grinding grain. Both relational processes actually exist, both are ontologically real, and each will impact its participants in differing ways—ways that in turn will shape the processes of the relational field. In this way the whole is more of a self-transforming or autopoietic (cf. Maturana & Varela, 1980) relational process than a collection of objects governed by rules.

From this stance the nature of the existence is not objective: anything that exists is a transformative relational process constituted and cocreated by its participants, and as participants differ and relational patterns evolve, what actually exists will necessarily shift. In this way, culturally-situated ultimates actually exist and are ontologically real within particular relational fields; they will necessarily differ between communities that participate in different relational fields. In Ferrer's (e.g., 2011) thought, then, multiple ontological claims regarding ultimacy can coexist because they are claims relating to ontologically real relational processes, not self-existent objective-like referents.

This critique of objective existence is closely related to the critique of universal knowledge claims that has been developed in feminist thought (e.g., Haraway, 1988). A feminist approach argues that knowers are always located in and colored by a particular place, time, context, history, and body (Code, 1991; Harding, 1991), and that universal knowledge, which claims to be free from such influences, is logically impossible. This stance resembles the earlier metaphor of how it is impossible to describe a painting objectively from the standpoint of being part of the painting.

To the degree that this argument is correct, efforts at describing the nature of ultimate reality are more about projecting one's own location onto the whole than about perceiving what is true. Wilber's speculations about a nondual source are no better and no worse than any other mythology that arises from a particular cultural location—in this case from the location of a

White American male interested in finding authoritative knowledge about ultimate reality as reflected in all spiritual traditions. While his system seeks to encompass a great many traditions, it addresses them from the very particular viewpoint of a historically and culturally located, gender-bodied person (cf. Code, 1991; Harding, 1991). Neither an inner feeling of certainty nor any number of other (predominantly male) thinkers offering similar speculations—his so-called *perennial sages* (Wilber, 2000)—make the case any stronger.

However, given that integral theory has already appropriated most spiritual traditions of any size, it is no surprise that it should attempt to do the same with a competing theory that points to the highly problematic shortcomings of its perennialist approach. Cultural appropriation is the exploitation of other cultures by a more dominant culture (e.g., Ziff & Rao, 1997), as when European-American culture takes on Native American elements of dress or practice, outside of the context of an informed and mutually respectful relationship with the communities to whom these cultural elements belong. Perennialism, which considers itself superior to every tradition and self-authorized to inform each tradition about its actual essence, is a strong example of cultural appropriation (e.g., King, 2001). To claim that participatory thought is really just another version of perennialism is an extension of this naturally appropriative stance.

The basis for this argument by integral theorists, then, reveals its shortcoming: Abramson (2015) claimed that participatory thought is perennialist in nature based on the assumption that Ferrer's notion of an unknown Mystery underlying human spirituality could be interpreted as making a similar claim as perennialism about the objective nature of ultimate reality. Ferrer's thought (2002), on the other hand, is situated in an entirely different ontology, a transformed notion of what constitutes existence. Ferrer has consistently distanced himself from perennialism based on this difference, having noted that objectivist assumptions about reality have deleterious impact on human values and relationship and the cultivation of transformative potential. In participatory approaches it is how an ultimate vision reflects and shapes these latter that has primacy, not how it might inform speculations about an ultimate objective reality that, within participatory thought, has no actual existence.

The challenge that integral perennialism set out to resolve is nevertheless a worthy one: to construct a philosophical context in which both science and scholarship can engage with those aspects of being human that are both subtler and more powerful than the mundane rhythms of daily life. By offering a frame in which objects are the product of relationships, rather than vice-versa, mystical, spiritual, and exceptional human experiences can be considered as actually-existing relational events (cf. Ferrer, 2008) rather than non-existing objects. By offering a critical frame that nonetheless grants ontological reality to these events, it becomes reasonable to seek ways that these phenomena might be examined with a scientific method that is rigorous in traditional ways yet subtly transformed by application within a novel philosophical context (cf. Hartelius, 2007). Here, then, may be the seeds of a psychology that can pursue inquiry into presence, attention, intuition, creativity, experiences of elevation, transcendence and awakening, and the subtle dynamics of mind and relationship, in a way that does not diminish those phenomena through the application of ill-fitting tools of analysis. The result may be not only a deeper understanding of these exceptional human experiences and capacities, but a revision of the psychological notion of what it is to be human (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007).

In This Issue

In 1985 Linda Meyers published a paper in the *Journal of Black Psychology* entitled, Transpersonal Psychology: The Role of the Afrocentric Paradigm. This paper pointed out the fact that the sort of integral worldview favored by transpersonal psychology existed in the African world view and in psychological theory deriving from that world view. On discovering this paper in the literature, I went directly to the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* to see what response this might have drawn. Here was an invitation to expand beyond the approaches of East and West, and include another great swath of human culture. There was, however, no sign of a response from the transpersonal community in its main journals. It is my hope that the Special Topic Section, edited by Angelina Graham, may serve as a belated response that acknowledges the importance—indeed the indispensability—of the contribution and participation of Black psychology in any comprehensive approach to transpersonal psychology.

In addition to this special section, introduced elsewhere by its editor, this issue offers a number of engaging papers in its general section, as well as book

reviews and responses to the editor that are worthy of attention.

First of these is a paper that presents validation for a Chinese version of a spiritual intelligence scale. This paper, by Arita Chan and Angela Siu, is descriptively titled, "Application of the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI-24) Among Hong Kong University Students," and represents a piece of the important work of bringing transpersonally relevant concepts into diverse cultural contexts. It also reflects the importance of scale development and other empirical research for whole person approaches to psychology.

Kathleen Pantano and Jeremy Genovese offer a novel study that inverts prior research: instead of considering the impact of internally- or externally-focused attention on a task such as balance training, their research tests the imact of different forms of attentional focus on the development of mindfulness. This paper, entitled, "The Effect of Internally versus Externally Focused Balance Training on Mindfulness," breaks important new ground on the relationship between attentional focus and mindfulness in a manner that promises to lead to future research.

Following this is a truly engaging paper on the Norse war magic phenomenon of *beserkergang*, a type of invulnerability magic that has often been considered either mythic or the result of intoxication. Author Jenny Wade makes a careful, detailed, and far-ranging scholarly case for this phenomenon as a transpersonal state of consciousness that confers remarkable abilities far beyond conventional human capacities. This paper, titled, "Going Berserk: Battle Trance and Ecstatic Holy Warriors in the European War Magic Tradition," includes both ancient and contemporary sources, and offers evidence for the limitations of such states.

Gabriel Crane's paper, "Harnessing the Placebo Effect: A New Model for Mind-Body Healing Mechanisms," is a refreshingly thorough and balanced consideration of the difficult and often contentious topic of the placebo effect. Weaving together developments from transpersonal theory with empirical research, Crane critiques contemporary models of the phenomenon and offers a satisfying reframe on this elusive yet powerful process. Crane's paper also garnered a positive and elucidating response from James Giordano, which is included after the Special Topic Section.

In a related paper, Alix Sleight provides a theoretical frame to help understand the power and limitations of meaning-making in cancer patients. This paper, "Liminality and Ritual in Biographical work: A Theoretical Framework for Cancer Survivorship," considers the potentially disruptive impact of cancer on the personal narrative, and how ritual processes can help to resolve this in ways that promote wellbeing and quality of life in ways that truly enhance the lives of cancer patients and cancer survivors.

Finally, a Letter to the Editor from Judith Blackstone opens long-overdue dialogue about the meaning of nonduality, and whether there are grounds for claiming that certain shifted states of mind that soften conventional boundaries between body and world are actually unconstructed states of consciousness that reveal the essential nature of consciousness.

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About the Journal

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