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Introduction to the Special Topic Section: The Taylor-Hartelius Debate on Psychology and Spirituality

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Introduction to the Special Topic Section: The Taylor-Hartelius Debate on Psychology and Spirituality

This special topic section of *IJTS* comprises what we would term, after Kahneman (e.g., see Kahneman & Klein, 2009) an “adversarial collaboration.” Kahneman introduced this term in the context of the controversy over replicability in psychology, given that many of the most revered studies within much of scientific psychology (e.g., Nosek & Errington, 2017) are now suspect due to failures to replicate. Kahneman had in mind that those who held different views on an empirical issue could collaboratively design a proper replication study together that would beforehand satisfy both adversarial parties as to its fairness. In the context of the *adversarial collaboration* in this special issue, it is not so much replicability that is the focus; rather the confrontation centers more on the *interpretation of data*, especially when the metaphysical assumptions underlying the interpretations are forced to the surface.

More specifically, the question at the core of the following Taylor-Hartelius debate concerns the overarching framework within which key topics in transpersonal psychology—especially that of individual transformation to states viewed by the transformed individuals as in some sense enriched by comparison to the previous state of being—should be viewed. In brief, Taylor argues for a modified version of the *perennialism* that seems to have been central to many in the early transpersonal movement, and which was elaborated considerably by Wilber starting with his 1975 paper in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* entitled, “Psychologia Perennis: The Spectrum of Consciousness,” and continuing through much of the reformulations of what is now termed his integral view. Hartelius builds on critiques of perennialism that many scholars of religion have advanced, and that have contributed to the transpersonal field through the work of Ferrer (2000, 2002) as well as Hartelius and Ferrer (2013).

As editors of this journal, we regard the dialogue in these pages as collaborative inasmuch as both players are seeking ways to advance transpersonal psychology. The adversarial edge is evident in the tenacity with

which each argues their corner. We believe that such adversarial collaborations are crucial to the further development of our discipline. Disputational and confrontational methods have proved their worth in the history of ideas—from Greek oratory, through Talmudic argument, to the peer-review orthodoxy of our day. Too much “coziness” never led to soaring wisdom! Of course, disputations have had their bitter taste—with, for example, medieval disputations being dominated by polemical hatred and character assassinations (Maccoby, 2001). One learns from history, then, the importance of respecting the opponent whilst pursuing the debate with rigor and intellectual honesty. We look forward to future adversarial collaborations conducted in this spirit.

As a guide to the reader there is offered here a brief summary of the dialogue that comprises this special issue. The dialogue began with the publication of Taylor’s (2016) paper on his *soft perennialism*, and Hartelius’ (2016) critical response. The follow-up consists of three papers by each participant, offering detailed presentations of their respective views and ripostes to the other’s arguments. The positions may be summarized as follows, beginning with Taylor’s case for a soft perennialism.

Taylor's Soft Perennialism

In Taylor's view, there is an important type of personal transformation, that many characterize as “awakening,” which happens both within and outside of spiritual contexts. Because it occurs in secular contexts as well as spiritual ones, and because the same fundamental themes and characteristics occur across different spiritual traditions, it appears to be a universal human potential. For Taylor, the most parsimonious non-reductive interpretation of data pertaining to the form of transformation characterized as “awakening” entails some version of perennialism, the term used to capture the cross-cultural commonalities in the transformational process. Doctrinal and ontological claims that exclude the study of perennialism from scientific psychology may

be bracketed off from the phenomenological data that support this notion of a universal human transformative potential.

Given that the phenomenology of these experiences is publicly accessible, this can be studied and tested empirically as evidence for perennialism or essentialism—in particular through engagement with spiritual practices that have given rise to cross-cultural mystical experiences with common characteristics. On this basis, perennialism and essentialism constitute legitimate interpretive frameworks for a transpersonal psychology. While essentialist interpretations of empirical data about spiritual experiences or states inevitably involve metaphysical assumptions, the reductive frame of science is also metaphysically based, and therefore is not in a position to reject other metaphysical positions as uncritical. For all of these reasons, transpersonal psychology should not align itself with a vision of science that rigidly excludes metaphysical positions. A more balanced approach would incorporate nuanced and phenomenologically based forms of perennialism, and consider metaphysical claims that challenge traditional scientific views, where these may be supported by reasonable evidence.

Hartelius' Critique

Hartelius, in turn, recognizes the importance of the potentially cross-cultural transformative process described by Taylor, but raises the following issues. In his view, claims that phenomenological studies provide evidence for a perennialist model employ circular reasoning in a critically unsound effort to bolster metaphysical speculations. This problem is confounded when a researcher such as Taylor, who appears to hold strong metaphysical beliefs, claims to discover evidence for these beliefs by conducting studies of the phenomenology of transformative processes in which his biases do not appear to be adequately bracketed.

Hartelius acknowledges that phenomenology and other empirical data may be interpreted within metaphysical frameworks in religious contexts, but holds that such an approach is out of place in scientific psychology. The fact that all inquiry, including science, requires some unavoidable metaphysical assumptions does not place every speculative metaphysical system on par with the well-demonstrated methods of science. Some of the limitations of a scientific approach may perhaps be avoided by bracketing simplistic Western

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materialist assumptions so the scientific study of spiritual phenomena might be less reductive, less shaped by the metaphysics of Western philosophy, and thereby more empirical and more productive. Perennialism and essentialism may have a place within the philosophy of spirituality, and may have hermeneutical value as a New Age religious notion, but these uncritical approaches have no valid role within psychology, transpersonal or otherwise.

Import for the Future of Transpersonal Psychology

The subject of this dialogue is not a trivial one, but can be seen to address the very heart and nature of transpersonal psychology. It concerns both the methodological criteria that facilitate meaningful gathering of data within the discipline and the metaphysical assumptions that impact on the explanatory frameworks it employs. The significance of the debate for the shape of transpersonal psychology moving forward, as well as the relationship of this branch to other branches of psychology, should be evident. Given this significance, it is the journal's position that debate on the role of perennialism, and associated issues, within the field should not be restricted to a few prominent voices such as those of Wilber, Ferrer, Taylor, and Hartelius, but should include the participation of a wide range of scholars. Accordingly, the journal invites participation in this conversation by interested parties, for publication in a future issue.

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About the Journal

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