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Zombie Perennialism: An Intelligent Design for Psychology? A Further Response to Taylor's Soft Perennialism

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In a recent paper Taylor has suggested that perennialist models are or should be resurgent within transpersonal psychology. However, perennialist models such as those of Wilber and Taylor are metaphysical philosophies of spirituality typical of New Age religions; while such systems may be studied by a psychology that considers human spirituality, they are not and should not be proffered as psychology. Claims that Taylor's soft perennialism are partly evidence based are compared with invalid claims that the narrative of Noah's flood or the Christian-based idea of intelligent design are partly evidence based. Critiques of Wilber's integral perennialism and Taylor's soft perennialism are offered, Taylor's defenses of his work are answered, his contributions are noted, and his concerns of inappropriate critique are rebutted. Taylor's model may be inspiring, but it is not scientific, and not psychological.

Keywords: *perennialism, integral theory, Ken Wilber, transpersonal psychology, New Age religion, spirituality, intelligent design, postmetaphysical*

The psychological study of spirituality sits somewhat awkwardly at the intersection of scientific rigor and multicultural creativity—more so in the light of feminist and other postmodern challenges to universal or objective knowledge. Given that science is itself culturally and philosophically situated, should doors be thrown open to the construction of new contexts for the study of spirituality, regardless of whether these meet rational criteria of intellectual rigor? Should a transpersonal psychology, for example, embrace alternate philosophies in a post-truth spirit (Higgins, 2016), where content is no more important than packaging and fact earns no greater due than appearance? This question is particularly salient in relationship to Wilber's metaphysically based integral psychology, as well as current efforts to create a new version of a similarly perennialist vision (e.g., Taylor, 2016).

While it is arguable from a postmodern perspective that there can be many philosophical containers, none of which carries more objective authority than another, this does not make all knowledge systems equally reliable. Psychology sits within the contingencies of a scientific context that can and likely should be informed and modified by feminist, participatory, and postmodern critiques and broadened

through multicultural engagement in ways that mitigate some of the limitations imposed by the particulars of Western culture and modernist philosophy. Yet the valid concern that cultural and philosophical values may influence scientific process should be seen as a limitation to be acknowledged and perhaps partially remedied rather than as justification to invent metaphysically based systems and represent them as valid by standards of empirical science or psychology, or even as intellectually rigorous postmetaphysical thought. By these standards Wilber's (e.g., 2000a, 2006) *integral theory* and Taylor's (2016) *soft perennialism* are both inspiring philosophies of spirituality, but neither as yet finds solid footing as a psychological approach to human spirituality.

In order to qualify for inclusion as psychology, an idea needs to meet certain standards. One of the most basic of these is that explanations cannot be metaphysical in the sense that they appeal to causes on the basis of authority or tradition rather than evidence of the sort anyone could examine for themselves if they took the trouble to do so. Explanations based on causes for which there likely can be no direct evidence are more typical of religious knowledge. For example, the Genesis story of the creation of rainbows is an explanation of this type. According to this eloquent literary account, rainbows were divinely created at the end of Noah's flood as a

sign that God would never again destroy the earth with a deluge (Genesis 9:12-17). Just as meteorologists cannot accept the Genesis report to explain a particular type of weather event, so psychology cannot accept explanations of this type for psychological phenomena—not even in a psychological approach to spirituality. Psychology can examine the content, implications, and heuristic value of metaphysical accounts, but it cannot offer them as psychological explanations. If it were to do so, it would be creating a *de facto* religious system and proffering it in the name of scientific psychology—which is clearly inappropriate.

This distinction is particularly important for transpersonal psychology, given that it has been validly critiqued for attempting to “integrate religiously-based theories into secular psychology” (Hanegraaf, 1998, p. 51), perhaps even providing something of a template for New Age religions. In such movements, entrepreneurs function as experts who disembed cultural elements of, for example, Indian, Chinese, or Native American origin, and create “radically recontextualized versions of how these cultural elements should be understood”; these new narratives “require faith in their veracity, and not hermeneutic suspicion” (Hammer, 2001, p. 46). Adherents to such religions may prefer the term *spirituality* to refer to what has been identified as secularized esotericism (Hanegraaf, 1998), yet the typical need for faith in esoteric forces or patterns or interpretations substantiates the religious label. As noted by Hanegraaf (1998) in reference to some strains of transpersonal psychology, “the transpersonal school, positing the perennial philosophy as the proper foundation of scientific research, has resulted in an openly religionist psychology” (p. 51).

That the field has in some measure strayed into metaphysical beliefs more characteristic of religion than psychology does not mean it should give up on the careful study of subtle, profound, or elevated states of consciousness or mystical, spiritual, and exceptional experiences and capacities as crucial aspects of the whole person. In popular thought these phenomena are often somewhat misleadingly described as metaphysical, so there can be a concern that stepping back from metaphysics might mean abandoning the very sorts of topics that first inspired a transpersonal approach. Abstaining from metaphysics refers instead to setting aside a certain category of explanation for these phenomena.

For any phenomenon there can be and often are scores of different explanations. In authoritarian societies determinations of which explanations are better typically come from those in power. Traditional societies, as the name suggests, usually make traditions the basis for such judgments. In a scientific society, it is evidence rather than religious authority or tradition that tends to prevail. In medieval Europe, the ability to rely on direct observation rather than ecclesiastic or feudal authority was revolutionary and in some ways emancipatory (cf. Ferrer, 2002). The Copernican cosmological revision—though it may have been less of a revolution and more of an incremental advance due to significant reliance on earlier Arabic astronomers (Ragep, 2007)—led eventually to a model in which Earth revolves around the Sun rather than vice versa. This was a triumph of data over dogma: facts from observations that anyone who extended the effort could make for themselves (assuming they had the necessary social status and resources) were used to overthrow the authority of religious power structures that had held sway for centuries. In a sense, then, science represented a democratization of knowledge, and in democratic societies science has largely come to be the arbiter of which explanations are better. As such, ideas in psychology need to be amenable to some form of evidence that anyone might be able to examine for themselves, and psychology rejects metaphysical explanations because they cannot be challenged in this way. To ask that psychology set aside this test (e.g., Cunningham, 2015; Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999; Taylor, 2017a) is to miss that this criterion is the very demarcation of a scientific approach that defines both its strength and its limits.

Of course, science has never been purely about evidence: it also includes strains of authority and tradition. For example, modernist Western philosophy—a traditional way of thinking for which there cannot be any independent evidence—is arguably responsible for certain assumptions generally taken for granted in scientific work: atomistic materialism (Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999) and Cartesian-Kantian dualism (Ferrer, 2000, 2002; Tarnas, 1991) are instances that readily come to mind. Knowledge that does not conform to these expectations is typically rejected or marginalized, regardless of its merit on other grounds.

Transpersonal scholars often point to the fact that psychology’s adoption of modernist assumptions may artificially narrow the range of evidence considered (e.g., Hartelius, 2014a). Specifically, there is concern that

mystical, spiritual, and other exceptional human states, experiences, and capacities are wrongly pathologized or marginalized as misattributions (e.g., Grof, 2013; Wiseman & Watt, 2006). For example, the entire field of parapsychology has been necessitated not by an absence of experimental evidence or rigor, but on the basis that the field examines phenomena that have been ruled out *a priori* by scientific expectations rooted in a Western worldview (Allison, 1979; Irwin, 2007). Particularly in the face of imperatives for psychology to develop in ways that reflect more than Western culture, the scope of empirical work considered to be valid may need to expand beyond these particular cultural boundaries (cf. Fowers & Davidov, 2006; Fowers & Richardson, 1996; Howard, 2003; Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2014). Yet such extensions need to be approached carefully, so that rigor and integrity are maintained.

One approach to this challenge in whole person approaches such as transpersonal and humanistic psychologies has been to focus on a study of lived experience using phenomenological and other forms of qualitative research (cf. Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999). Through careful attention to sensate details of particular types of experience, psychological knowledge can be constructed in ways that may be less shaped by modernist or other specific worldviews and more by prereflective experiences that may retain greater similarity across cultural diversities. In addition there are approaches to quantifying complex qualitative data (Hartelius, 2015a; Pekala, 1995a, 1995b; Pekala & Kumar, 2000, 2007). With these rich resources available, it becomes possible to at least entertain notions such as James' (1904a, 1904b) *radical empiricism*, which held that only elements capable of being directly experienced should be considered by science—and, more radically, that *all* such elements should be considered, including the experienced relations between them (cf. Laughlin & McManus, 1995; Taylor, 1994). Despite occasional concerns that some experiences may be ineffable (e.g., Osborne, 2013), there are adequate ways to convey something of substance about a great number of human experiences, whether mundane or exceptional.

Philosophies of mind and of spirituality still deserve inclusion in discussions within transpersonal psychology, as these have been of interest from the field's earliest days. Moreover, every psychology is likely to have some implied philosophical assumptions. However, the legacy of Wilber's work raises questions about whether it

is psychology—even transpersonal psychology—when metaphysical philosophies of spirituality are woven together with psychological theories in ways that create systems indistinguishable from New Age religions (cf. Hanegraaff, 2009). Transpersonal psychology has critiqued the imposition of explicitly modernist values in the supposedly neutral domain of science, and has sought to learn from spiritual traditions what wisdom they might carry for addressing challenges of the human mind and heart. Honoring this diversity of expressions of spirituality, or even adopting insights and practices from traditional contexts, is quite a different thing from inventing systems that rely on essentially (and essentialist) religious ideas and presenting them as if they were scientifically validated approaches to psychology. Creations such as Wilber's perennialist New Age religion can be respectfully studied by a transpersonal psychology, but it is doubtful whether any of these should also be presented *as* a transpersonal psychology.

This matter gains relevance in light of Taylor's (2017a, this issue) suggestion that perennialism is or should be on the rise within transpersonal psychology. With this optimistic suggestion he offers his own version, soft perennialism, as successor to the work of Wilber, which has been the target of considerable substantive critique over the past several decades (e.g., Falk, 2009; Ferrer, 1998, 2002, 2011a; Hartelius, 2015a; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2015; Rothberg, Kelly, & Kelly, 1998; Schneider, 1989). Taylor deserves credit for original and creative ideas, and his effort to reconcile participatory and perennialist thought is a worthy goal. However, a careful analysis demonstrates that the structure of his model is perennialist to much the same degree as Wilber's, and largely subject to the same critiques. In place of Wilber's transcendent nondual, Taylor has proposed an immanent and all-pervasive spiritual force—what amounts to a metaphysical interpretation of a particular category of phenomenal experience. This force may be experienced from many different locations on the landscape of experience, producing the variations one sees in religions. Taylor's thought is as yet in early stages, and his combination of phenomenological research with participatory thought shows some promise—*sans* its perennialist superstructure—as a transpersonal approach. In its present form, however, the most promising portions of Taylor's approach is little more than a potentially helpful topographical metaphor that may be worthy of future development in Taylor's thought.

Given transpersonal psychology's troubled history with Wilber's system, it seems unlikely that resurrected or undead forms of perennialism will roam the field's landscape in great numbers anytime soon. Nor does this seem a helpful strategy for the field. If transpersonal psychology continues to expend its credibility on grand metaphysical theories and New Age religions, it will have little left for its potentially vital role in contributing to a whole person psychology in ways that can directly impact the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people who find their experiences and capacities marginalized or pathologized.

Making Sense of Spiritual Diversity

Years ago I watched a documentary on life in a cave deep inside a mountain, accessible only by means of an underground river. The fact that sightless insects and other organisms had adapted to the very specific conditions of this location in remarkable ways opened my mind to the riotous variegations of life—how every location bursts with creative expressions of the pulsing rhythms of organic ingenuity. This is no less true for human spirituality than it is for biological diversity, evident not only between traditions but within them. For example, Hinduism is often thought of as a single tradition, yet the term is less than 200 years old (Flood, 1996), and originally referred to a broad variety of local traditions in regions east of the Indus river (cf. Gellner, 2005).

This diversity has posed a challenge for modern disciplines of (primarily Western) scholarship. How does one explain the fact that spiritual traditions consistently refer to experiences that are somehow not part of ordinary reality, yet describe them in such inconsistent ways? How can one make sense of experiences, practices, narratives, and beliefs that are so diverse, and yet seem to share some ephemeral commonalities? Transpersonal psychology has held the position that spirituality is an aspect of the whole person, and that its stories and practices may point to real human capacities related to exceptional states of consciousness. This perspective is broader than that of orthodox religion, which typically bestows reality on only one tradition and assumes other religions to be false or misleading. It is also in some degree of tension with views based in science or the humanities that reduce spirituality to illusory constructions, denying it any form of reality other than what it may enjoy within the fabric of the stories that societies tell themselves. This situation

has led some transpersonal scholars to seek explanatory frameworks beyond conventional approaches.

For Abraham Maslow (1962/1968, 1969, 1970), this meant expanding psychology beyond a focus on pathology and a so-called objectivity that treated persons uncaringly as if they were objects or animals. He believed that humans had unique capacities—what he referred to as “the farther reaches of human nature” (1969, p. 1)—and that these were natural and empirical aspects that psychology could address through a properly attuned scientific approach (1970). However, Maslow died in 1970, just one year after the founding of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*.

If Maslow, the most influential founder, had survived for another decade, his research background in primate behavior and motivation might have guided the field toward the kinds of empirical approaches suited to a transpersonal psychology. With his passing much of the field embarked on a new direction, guided by the vision of a young Ken Wilber. In his first scholarly offering, Wilber (1975) proposed that just as developmental psychology traces the development of the individual through ego maturation, so a perennial philosophy—or *philosophia perennis*—could be grafted on as an extension into beyond-ego or post-conventional development—what he called a *psychologia perennis*.

Wilber's Integral:

A New Age Religion

That Wanted to Be a Psychology

Perennial philosophy holds that all spiritual traditions are reflections of a single underlying truth, a view that arose out of medieval efforts to reconcile Christian theology with Judaism and Platonic thought (Schmidt-Biggemann, 2004). Prior to Wilber, versions of perennialism were adopted by movements such as romanticism, American transcendentalism (Hanegraaff, 2009), theosophy (Partridge, 2013), and the traditionalist school of esoteric thought (Diaz, 2014); such views were expounded by early 20th century figures such as Evelyn Underhill (Stoeber, 2013), Edgar Cayce (Hanegraaff, 2009), and Aldous Huxley (1945). Wilber's work applied this impulse from popular American culture to the fledgling field of transpersonal psychology.

This is not to say that empirical research died out entirely from transpersonal scholarship. While an informal review of transpersonal journals will turn up a modest if growing percentage of empirical papers

(Hartelius, Rothe, & Roy, 2015), scholars such as Harris Friedman (2002, 2015) and Douglas MacDonald (2013) have consistently advocated for transpersonal psychology as a science. Others, such as Charles Tart and Dean Radin, have adopted what might be called an empirically agnostic parapsychology framework within which to conduct research on a wide variety of transpersonal topics. At the same time, Friedman has received strong critique of his support of empirical work within the field (e.g., Ferrer, 2014), despite his qualification that commitments to science should not be ideological (i.e., *scientism*; Friedman, 2002).

Wilber's perennialist initiative attempted to go beyond a modest critique or qualification of science as offered by Maslow, or later by Friedman, and instead situated the field within an alternate philosophical frame. Compared with the agnostic stance of parapsychology, which simply sets aside a potentially limited materialist philosophy implicit in much of psychology, the suggestion that all spiritual paths lead toward an actual shared spiritual reality represented what seemed like a bold advance that affirmed human spirituality without privileging any particular tradition. For some years Wilber's model was widely accepted within the field (Needleman & Eisenberg, 1987; Rothberg, 1986). By at least the early 2000s, the shortcomings of perennialism generally, and Wilber's work in particular, had come into clearer view (Ferrer, 1998, 2000, 2002; Rothberg et al., 1998; Schneider, 1989).

With the benefit of historical perspective, it is possible to recognize that this philosophical initiative was problematic from its inception. In addition to the numerous issues identified by Ferrer (2000, 2002, 2011a), perennialism is a metaphysical philosophy of spirituality whereas psychology is an empirical study of the human mind and its expressions. While each of these projects is valid in its own right, Wilber's syncretic effort to meld the two merely deposited versions of science and religion into a shared container and papered over the top so as to obscure the divide that persists between them.

Wilber's system, a complex, convoluted, and confidently asserted construction, remains rife with deeply problematic fissures. A review of these requires more time and attention than would otherwise be warranted for a project with such extensive flaws. Yet in some sense the sheer scope of Wilber's undertaking constitute grounds for careful consideration. Howard Hughes' massive ocean-going seaplane known as the

Spruce Goose, which earned a place in history even though it reportedly never flew more than a mile or gained more than 70 feet of altitude, provides an apt metaphor for Wilber's monumental if dubious efforts. Given the current impulse to revive perennialist ideas within the transpersonal field (Taylor, 2016, 2017a), such an exercise also seems timely, since some of the weaknesses inherent in Wilber's approach endure into efforts at reformulation.

The term *integral* suggests inclusion of everything essential for completeness. With this name Wilber (2000a) has seemed to propose that his all-quadrant all-level (AQAL) model is actually a complete psychology, "embracing the enduring insights of premodern, modern, and postmodern sources" (p. 5). His AQAL model looks to be an adaptation of Schumacher's (1977) four fields of knowledge: the inner awareness of oneself, the inner experiences of others, considering oneself from an objective perspective, and a study of the external world (cf. Ferrer, 2017). These are arranged in quadrant form, with the two left-hand quadrants representing the interior of the individual (upper left) and of groups (lower left); the two right-hand quadrants represent the exterior of the individual (upper right) and of groups (lower right). Added to this are lines from the center of the diagram to the exterior corner of each quadrant, representing corresponding forms of development or evolution. Because he has been able to sort a wide variety of phenomena into this grid based on just three variables (singular/plural, interior/exterior, and developmental lines), Wilber (e.g., 2000b) has represented this as a comprehensive map of knowledge.

Contemplating aspects of developmental psychology, evolution, and esoteric philosophy within the same rubric is certainly thought provoking. However, the fact that quite different types of things can be sorted onto the same grid based on a few simple variables does not in itself integrate these into a consistent or meaningful whole. For example, developmental psychology does not become compatible with the metaphysical philosophy of perennialism just because the two are placed contiguously on a line in a diagram; nor is the tension between subjective and objective categories resolved by situating two quadrants representing subjective perspectives next to two representing objective views.

What holds together these disparate elements in Wilber's model is his concept of *the nondual*. The nondual is the ultimate reality and the source of

the four quadrants (Wilber, 2006, p. 288); it is the endpoint of spiritual evolution (p. 102), and it is a state of consciousness that unites subject and object (p. 110). Because subjective and objective quadrants arise from this same source, their apparent tension is resolved; because all of creation is evolving toward this same goal, psychological development and philosophies of spiritual evolution can be grafted together as different parts of the path to that goal. Without the nondual, a common New Age religious concept (Versluis, 2014), these ill-fitting conjoinings do not work, and Wilber's system is little more than an intriguing way to associate things that may or may not be related.

Yet the nondual is a metaphysical concept, an idea for which by definition there can be no more direct evidence than there is for, say, God. Given this challenge, what Wilber (2000a) has offered as verification for this claim is, first, that the pattern he has perceived in his study of spiritual traditions is consistent with his theory, and second, that in his readings he has found that others have reported what seems to him a similar pattern. The fact that Wilber sees patterns in the data that confirm his ideas—whether directly in his readings of and about traditions or in the opinions of others—is hardly compelling evidence for so large a claim. This form of self-confirmation does not rise to being “some version of ... objective evidence” (Wilber, 2006, p. 234) that Wilber has acknowledged as necessary. His contention that “the discovery of these waves, over the years, has been communally generated and consensually validated” (Wilber, 2000a, p. 8) similarly comes with no supporting evidence that this is the case. As such, the essential concept that makes Wilber's grand scheme work relies primarily on Wilber's assertion that it is so.

Generally, when a scholar bases an entire theory on a concept for which there can be no substantive evidence, the theory fails. Perhaps in part to distract from this challenge, Wilber has made the claim that his work is not metaphysical but *postmetaphysical*. Postmetaphysical as a term has gained currency in the wake of Richard Rorty's (1979) first book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, that effectively shifted from critique of particular epistemologies to a careful dismantling of the enterprise of situating knowledge on some ahistorical and transcultural basis of objective fact. In this context the term metaphysical is used with a different meaning, referring to the assumption that the scientific project of grounding knowledge in empirical evidence assumes

that this process results in some correspondence with an external, objective reality; Rorty argued that this assumption is false, and that scientific knowledge, as any other form of constructed knowledge, is established only within the meaning fabric of its community or culture. Rorty himself envisioned that this would lead to knowledges that embrace their own contingencies (O'Shea, 1995). Habermas (2006) has suggested that, in place of seeking reference to an objective world, postmetaphysical knowledge might “become self-critically aware of its boundaries” by “reconstruct[ing] the history of its own genesis” (p. 16). Such approaches to knowledge might engage with others, the world, and existence itself in ways that Heidegger has described as immediate and relational, even revelatory, rather than calculated and circumscribed (Smith, 1991).

Wilber's approach to postmetaphysics acknowledges the embeddedness of knowledge in bodies and cultures (Esbjörn-Hargens & Wilber, 2006), but apparently considers situating variously-embodied knowledges within his four-quadrant framework an adequate substitute for any actual integration. While locating perspectives relative to a simple grid may be helpful by placing them within a particular given frame, any such frame is itself a perspective that has its own history and contingencies—a fact that Wilber (2006) has seemed to deny by identifying the integral stage of development—ostensibly represented by his integral framework—as “aperspectival” (pp. 242, 243). In this way Wilber has exempted his own AQAL framework from the necessary constraints of postmetaphysics, while simultaneously claiming to be postmetaphysical.

Wilber's position seems to be that his four-quadrant model is aperspectival, perhaps because of a sense that it has emerged on its own from the data of spiritual traditions through his engagement with this material, and as corroborated by so-called “perennial sages” (2000a, p. 8). If this were so, it would seem that the integral theory framework must reflect reality in some profound way. Yet his claim that this knowledge has some factual correspondence with objective reality is precisely the sort of metaphysically naïve stance—following Rorty's definition of metaphysical—that Wilber has claimed to transcend.

The implied assertion that integral theory constitutes an inherently integrating context may come from the idea that “all four [of Wilber's] quadrants co-arise and are different aspects of the same occasion” (Esbjörn-

Hargens & Wilber, 2006, p. 544), which seems to be a more developed version of Wilber's (1977) early vision that subjectivity and objectivity reflect complementary aspects of a primary dualism arising out of the ultimate reality of nondual awareness. The notion of considering together various types of knowledge is far from original; the claim that simply placing subjective and objective approaches in proximal quadrants will restore some primordial unity may be overly optimistic, and again reflects the metaphysical origins of Wilber's work in two senses: it assumes an intimate correspondence between subjectivity and objectivity (metaphysical in Rorty's sense), and it postulates an ultimate reality for which there can be no public evidence (metaphysical in a more conventional sense). His later addition of intersubjective and interobjective approaches (Esbjörn-Hargens & Wilber, 2006) adds complexity, but neither resolution or clarity. It seems safe to conclude that Wilber's integral approach is not postmetaphysical, even by its own definitions of that term. An authentically postmetaphysical approach might extend Rorty's critique of mind as a mirror of nature by "put[ting] to rest the equally problematic image of contemplative or visionary 'consciousness as mirror of spirit' implicit in much classical and contemporary spiritual discourse" (Ferrer, 2017, p. 193); however, such a stance would discredit Wilber's entire system.

This is but one of the key failures of integral theory. The fact that multiple philosophies and spiritualities are considered makes it in some ways encyclopedic, but this is different than containing everything necessary for a comprehensive map of knowledge, or even for a complete psychology; in this sense Wilber's approach is not meaningfully integral. Its solution to subject-object dualism and spiritual diversity relies on a perennialist notion of transcendent nondual reality that has more in common with religion than with science or scholarship or a psychology (cf. Hartelius & Ferrer, 2015). Assertions that the approach is supported by objective evidence fall well short, as do claims that it is not metaphysical, or that it is not perennialist (cf. Hartelius, 2015a).

Each of these questionable claims has been advanced with clever turns of phrase that do not stand up to critical examination. Some years ago at a state fair I purchased a set of six kitchen knives that, according to the enthusiastic salesman, *never needed sharpening*. I got more than my money's worth in years of use, but only

later learned that these knives did not need sharpening because they *could not be sharpened*. By at times using arguments akin to a sales pitch designed to conceal flaws rather than illuminate, Wilber's work appears to have more in common with a professionally marketed commercial product than a carefully constructed area of knowledge. As a product, Wilber's integral theory may in fact be quite satisfactory for some popular audiences (Hartelius, 2015a), but it is crucial that within scholarly fields its nature be clearly discerned.

Taylor's Soft Perennialism: Another New Age Religion With Psychology Aspirations

While Wilber's ideas are no longer dominant within transpersonal psychology (cf. Ferrer, 2011b), Taylor (2016) has offered a revised, soft perennialism that proposes a varied landscape of spiritual paths and destinations rather than a single transcendent ultimate. In response to recent critique (Hartelius, 2016), Taylor (2017a, this issue) has offered an extended clarifying response. With some caveats, Taylor's revised explanation of his landscape metaphor of spiritual paths seems potentially compatible both with scientific inquiry into certain types of spiritual experience as state-specific phenomena (Hartelius, 2007, 2015b; Tart, 1972; Varela, 1996), as well as with participatory approaches (cf. Ferrer, 2017) within which a state of consciousness could be one aspect of an individual's *locatedness* (Hartelius, 2015b; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2015). This part of his approach does not qualify as perennialist in any conventional sense, and is well within the range of other transpersonal approaches.

A second major element in Taylor's (2016) soft perennialism is his claim that from different locations on this experiential landscape, an all-pervasive spiritual force or spiritual energy will be perceived differently—to some it will appear as an ultimate transcendent reality, as in Wilber's perennialism; to others it may appear in other forms. This notion, which in his response (2017a) he acknowledges as explicitly metaphysical, is apparently his effort to reconcile participatory and perennialist approaches.

While Taylor (2016) has echoed several important critiques of Wilber, his attempt at a solution follows Wilber's strategy of resorting to a metaphysical concept that cannot be independently verified or falsified (more on Taylor's stance toward science later)

as a way to resolve otherwise incommensurable elements. With the addition of this metaphysical claim, it gains a structure that directly parallels Wilber's integral theory: a metaphysical constant that can be experienced from multiple standpoints. For Wilber, the constant is a singular, transcendent nondual that can be perceived and described from various cultural locations; for Taylor it is an all-pervading spiritual force that can be experienced and described from various experiential locations.

The perennialism of Taylor's version is constructed differently than Wilber's, and following Daniels' (2005, 2009; cf. Wilber, 1995) distinction between paths that *ascend* toward transcendence and those that *descend* toward underlying immanence, might be characterized as a *descending perennialism*, in contrast with Wilber's *ascending perennialism*. Although Taylor's (2016) perennialism appears novel in some aspects, and might warrant the creation of another category in Ferrer's (2002) typology of perennialisms, it does not seem softer, in the sense of less problematically metaphysical, than Wilber's.

Given the perennialist nature of its overall structure, Taylor's (2016) soft perennialism is necessarily subject to many of the same critiques as Wilber's integral perennialism (e.g., Ferrer, 2000, 2011a; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2015), or as Taylor has referred to it, *hard perennialism*. Taylor's argument is that his own metaphysical claims are not entirely speculative because they are congruent with empirical phenomenological data, and therefore are "to some degree evidence-based" (p. 82). This is a key assertion that deserves careful consideration, resonating as it does with Wilber's claim that his approaches to validation represent some version of objective evidence.

I was educated in a conservative community that believed Earth was created in seven literal days, and that Noah built a wooden ark that saved human and animal life from a flood that covered the entire planet. According to this view, paleontologists who take fossils and other materials as evidence of evolution are misreading the catastrophic aftermath of the biblical flood. For example, in a college course I learned that bible-believing scholars have argued for flood-friendly explanations of fossil forests—continuing an interpretive tradition that reaches back to at least the 17th century (Gastaldo, 1999). Fossil records in some areas have been seen as representing numerous forests that grew one after another, punctuated by some form of destruction, creating geological records spanning tens of thousands of

years. But if there had been a worldwide flood, perhaps these same features might have been created by *log mats*, clusters of stumps from the destruction of the planet's forests that may have aggregated in certain areas due to currents in the receding waters of Noah's flood (cf. Oard & Giesecke, 2007). When my sources extended beyond this carefully curated evidence, it slowly became apparent that these so-called creation scientists were in fact searching the literature for evidence that might somehow be read in ways that supported their prior beliefs, or for minor inconsistencies that could be used to challenge the prevailing view of a geological history reaching back longer than a miraculous divine creation of the world some 6,000 years ago. Highly selective readings of empirical evidence do not turn the exquisite mythic narratives of the Genesis creation stories into geological history. Yet following Taylor's (2017a) example, such efforts—as well as many far more inflammatory half-truths—could be misleadingly afforded the status of being "evidence-based" (p. 86).

As this example demonstrates, the issue is not just about empirical evidence itself, but also the lens through which facts are viewed. *Intelligent design* is a now-discredited effort to use scientific research in support of metaphysical ideas drawn from biblical creationism (e.g., Wells, 2000; cf. Coyne, 2001). In doing so, intelligent design used scientific fact, but attempted to interject an interpretive lens based in an entirely religious idea. The result is not so much a conciliation of science and religion as the subversion of scientific evidence in support of a religious vision. One might make a similar case regarding Wilber's incorporation of psychology in a New Age religious system based on the nondual; Taylor's soft perennialism is, in like manner, a religious model based on an immanent, all-pervading spiritual force, that has incorporated phenomenological studies of a particular type of (sometimes) spiritual experience. Of course, religious ideas deserve full appreciation and respect, but *as religious ideas*, not as scientific or psychological ones, not even when they claim an unverifiable relationship to empirical data.

In fact, it is the nature of metaphysical concepts within religions to explain some mundane experience through appeal to a hidden or undemonstrable cause. In this way, virtually every such idea is related to empirically observable phenomena. For example, in Navajo tradition the presence of people is explained by their predecessors, the insect-like air-spirit people or *Nítch'i dinè'é*, who

emerged from deep within the earth (Zolbrod, 1987); in ancient Near Eastern tradition weather events are caused by a storm god, often *Baal* (Green, 2003); and in the text of the biblical book of Genesis the origin of humans is ascribed to divine creation by either *Elohim* or *Yahweh*. In each of these cases a religious idea is in some sense based on empirical phenomena, yet it would be extraordinary to claim that this fact constitutes empirical evidence for the associated religious concepts. For example, the presence of humans today is not evidence that the *Nitsh'i dine'è* existed in the past in some Western historical sense. The fact that Wilber's (2006) and Taylor's (2016) metaphysical ideas are, similarly, extrapolations from empirical and experiential evidence does not make these ideas any less metaphysical, or any more empirically based.

Taylor (2016, 2017a, 2017b) has presented some empirical evidence, and its strength and import deserves close attention, since he has placed such emphasis on this feature. On the basis of preliminary evidence for a type of experience that at least does not conflict with his soft perennialism, he has claimed that these findings constitute some degree of empirical evidence for his metaphysical theory. If one postulates a theory and then finds empirical evidence that supports that theory, this would seem to constitute meaningful confirmation. Yet evidence that a type of experience occurs is not evidence for any particular explanation of that experience or theory about its significance. For example, someone who believed Earth had been visited by alien space travelers in the ancient past might point to the Uffington White Horse—a (likely) ancient stylized figure of a horse in England's Berkshire Downs formed by trenches filled with white chalk and stretching longer than a football field—as an example of art that must have been designed to be seen from high above. Yet just because such a chalk figure could be made to fit within a theory about alien space visitors does not make it into evidence that such visitors existed. Taylor has offered empirical evidence, but it is evidence for the existence of a type of experience, not for his perennialist explanations of that experience. In this sense, the evidence that Taylor has offered does not even apply to his soft perennialism, let alone support it.

Taylor is not the first to conflate an experience with a metaphysical claim about that experience. Cunningham (2015) has made the argument, based on a Jamesian radical empiricism stance, that transpersonal experiences can reveal “transcendental realities” (p. 104),

and that because the channeled materials attributed to the purported entity named Seth have a certain coherence and impact it is inexcusable to claim that this entity is unreal. However, the Seth materials are only empirical evidence of *an experience or process that resulted in these materials*, not in the literal reality of the disembodied entity to which they are ascribed. Until and unless relevant evidentiary processes can be developed for validating this latter claim, it remains entirely metaphysical. If I were to claim that chickens have feathers because these were a gift from Hermes, winged messenger of the gods, photographic evidence of chickens with feathers would not constitute empirical evidence for the god Hermes or for the divine origin of chicken feathers. If Cunningham (2015) has intended this argument for the reality of the Seth entity as an example of what he named *transpersonal empiricism*, then the latter appears to be a practice of uncritically commingling empirical data with metaphysical interpretations of those data—a practice to be scrupulously avoided (Hartelius, 2016)—rather than a meaningful form of empiricism.

This is not to suggest that all of Taylor's work is equally problematic. His approach contains two quite different strategies that neatly illustrate what may be a useful divide between science and religion in a transpersonal psychology. His landscape metaphor, in which there are many potential ranges of exceptional human experience and even more paths through them, allows for spiritual diversity and also situates such experiences within the domain of what a psychology may be able to encompass. His all-pervasive spiritual force, on the other hand, is a metaphysical interpretation of phenomenological experience that is firmly in line with religious thought. By attempting the worthy project of reconciling a participatory approach with a perennialist model, Taylor has succeeded only in creating a new form of perennialism. While this may be rightly valued in the domain of popular spirituality, it is likely not a psychology—transpersonal or otherwise.

There is a subtle but crucial concern to be addressed here: A transpersonal psychology has interest in the culturally situated approaches to mental and emotional difficulties that are often contained within spiritual traditions, including the hermeneutical value of explicitly religious texts (cf. Lancaster, 2015), and how these might inform the culturally situated discipline of psychology (cf. Friedman, 2017); to this end, through an interest in plural epistemologies (e.g., Ferrer, 2002)

and multiple ways of knowing (e.g., Hastings et al., 2001), the field has a demonstrated interest in softening the bounds of its own cultural location. Yet a challenge inherent in this process is how to gain a broader and more flexible base of contingent assumptions without wholly undercutting the demonstrated benefits of a critical and scientific approach—that is, without jettisoning what makes transpersonal a psychology.

Perennialist positions do affirm multiple cultural locations, but in order for this kind of approach to work it is necessary to transparently abandon any pretense of scientific scholarship. A perennialist approach asserts that one particular spiritual vision—one out of the thousands that have been crafted—is *the correct account of all of human spirituality*, and explains all other versions as lesser or partially informed variants of its own vision. In this way perennialism is necessarily and intrinsically hierarchical—even soft perennialism, despite Taylor’s (2016) claims to the contrary. As has been noted, such a stance is more typical of orthodox proselytizing religions than of any form of modern scholarship. Furthermore, one is asked to accede to this rather grand assertion without any direct evidence of the sort that can be shared with others. In other words, one has to examine their own personal experience and decide whether or not to accept the account of a person who claims to hold an authoritative insight. While such a conversion process happens routinely and appropriately within many of the world’s religions, it is rather less fitting to proffer it under the guise of a psychology.

On the other hand, some may feel that science is not an adequate container for a human psychology, and that spirituality is too vital and too powerful to be constrained by the requirements of such a mundane discipline. For example, Taylor (2017a) defends his metaphysically based approach by rejecting suggestions that the shared biological heritage of the human family might be in any way correlated with similarities in what he has identified as *awakening* experiences across a variety of religious and secular contexts; his concern is that these might constitute neuroscientific reductionism. It is apparently his rejection of any correlations with the body that create an urgent need for a perennialist position, for once biological factors are eliminated some other explanation for experiential similarities needs to be sought.

Yet there may be more evidence for correlations between mental events and neural activity than Taylor has represented (e.g., Hinterberger, Zlabinger, &

Blaser, 2014), and neurobiological theories need not be reductionist. If the whole person is an interconnected living system, then surely many of its aspects will reflect the processes of the whole. For example, an acupuncturist placing needles in the ear to treat organ systems of the body would seem to be seeing the whole interactively reflected in a part in a way that is not especially reductive. Seeing the nervous system as reflecting the whole person in a similar way does not require subscribing to a bottom-up biological perspective. Indeed, a whole person approach to psychology that specifically excluded neurobiology would be somewhat paradoxical. General similarities do seem to exist in some aspects of spiritual experience in various contexts, and while these appearances do not always survive closer examination or broader samplings, for similarities that do survive scrutiny there are better explanations than perennialism. A neurobiological theory greatly reduces any urgent need for explanation by some some form of perennialism, and is considerably more parsimonious.

Furthermore, reductionism is not always problematic. Qualitative research, including Taylor’s (2012) own qualitative research, involves a process of reducing transcripts to themes; explanatory reduction enables complex information to be grasped in terms of salient features; even language entails reducing many unique phenomena to a single category such as *dog* or *door*. Sense perception itself requires that the “blooming, buzzing confusion” (James, 1890, p. 488) be reduced to manageable impressions, to which end education exerts great efforts. Naïve naturalistic or materialistic reductionism can be problematic (cf. MacDonald & Friedman, 2012), but the mere fact that a process involves some reduction should not make it immediately suspect.

Concerns among transpersonal scholars about an overly simplistic mechanical or materialist interpretation of spiritual experience are not wrong, nor are critiques of the limitations of empiricism misplaced (cf. Ferrer, 2014). The reach of science is limited, and there is by now a long history of effective critiques of rational empirical approaches including Foucault (1970), Derrida (1976), de Beauvoir (1949), Hartssock (1983), Lyotard (1984), and Rorty (1979), among many others; as a result it has become clear that science is a culturally, historically, and even gender situated project that cannot yield knowledge of a discrete and objective world. Nor is there an external standard by which knowledge systems can be compared, since all knowledge construction is

situated within similar contingencies. Yet critiques of science are implicitly predicated on its presence rather than serving as an adequate case for its absence; similarly, the fact that a liberal democracy allows criticism of government—often well deserved—is no argument for replacing it with an absolute monarch under whom no such dissent would be tolerated. In this sense, for the work of building a diverse psychology of the whole person, it is likely better to have a fallible science than an infallible religion.

In this light, what is particularly troubling in Taylor's (2017a) stance toward science is a false equivalency that takes the unavoidable presence of *some* metaphysical assumptions within science as license to invent systems that rely *substantively and uncritically* on grand universal assumptions that are untestable by any empirical means. This approach carries no small risk: If applied to media it would suggest that since all news reporting inevitably has some bias, then outright fabrications, lies, and alternative facts are of equal status as careful journalism; it could likewise be used to argue that since most politicians may be corrupt to a greater or lesser degree, it matters not whether a shamelessly corrupt person is elected to high office. Any review of current or historical events will show such reasoning to be dangerously wrong. False equivalencies of this sort are characteristic of a simplistic, even opportunistic brand of post-truth postmodernism that appears to have gained some currency in Western societies during recent decades. At times more well intended versions of this same reasoning have appeared even within transpersonal circles.

Despite this strain of thought, evidence matters and the quality of knowledge matters, even within a contingent system. Every day human lives and cultures depend on tested approaches to knowledge being implemented with as much integrity as possible. While ongoing critique and refinement of those approaches is part of maintaining their integrity, pointing to limitations does not warrant the cavalier discarding of effective if imperfect systems of knowledge construction. When I travel to and from my university, I drive an aging dark grey Honda sedan. It has a big dent in one fender where someone backed into it and fled. It no longer gets the gas mileage it used to, there is sun damage to the upholstery, and my mechanic tells me a couple of axles will need to be replaced. I would not rely on it to hold up offroad or across country. Though fallible and limited, I

still find it quite reliable for most of my needs on a day to day basis. In a similar way, science does not need to be perfect in order to be generally reliable.

Respect for the careful methods of science does not mean surrender to naïve materialism, or a physicalism that attempts to explain all phenomena in the stark terms of physics (Strawson, 2006). Nor does it imply, as Taylor (2017a) would have it, that transpersonal psychology would need to give up the study of psychic phenomena or nondual and transcendent states of consciousness. There is a very large difference between a subtle skill or experience or state of consciousness, and metaphysical interpretations of those phenomena or notions about ultimate sources of reality or all-pervasive spiritual forces. While the latter are speculative constructions that by their nature cannot be confirmed using any form of public evidence, the former can be studied phenomenologically in ways that are congruent with scientific methods. What Taylor has advanced is an entirely false dichotomy between wholesale acceptance of spiritual-metaphysical speculations within psychology and the sterile constraints of logical positivism. There is ample middle ground that can be productive without falling prey to either of these extremes (cf. Friedman, 2015).

In addition, other strategies such as pursuing Tart's (1972) suggestion that science has largely been implemented within the context of a single, conventional state of consciousness and carries a paradigm that reflects this, opens the possibility of applying the processes of scientific method within the context of other states of consciousness. If such states of consciousness can be adequately described and defined (Hartelius, 2015b), then applying scientific method within selected nonordinary states (cf. Varela, 1996) may help to overcome an overly mechanistic approach (cf. Cunningham, 2015) without abandoning the strengths of scientific scholarship or resorting to uplifting but critically vulnerable spiritual visions.

What will serve is not new religious systems that posture as psychologies, but approaches that attempt the challenging work of understanding as much as possible of the dynamic processes of the whole person within the full range of human cultures and contexts. In this effort, good tools with long histories of powerful application such as critical thought and empirical evidence should not be reified, nor should they be too readily marginalized or disregarded simply because they exist within contingent systems that remain limited and imperfect.

Conclusion

Taylor's (2016) work, like Wilber's, is a thoughtful and inspiring spiritual vision that also takes the trouble to consider empirical data in the context of its metaphysical speculations. As with Wilber, Taylor's project is not psychological, even though it appeals to psychological studies; as with intelligent design, it is not scientific. Whether or not a handful of contemporary academics support perennialist or essentialist positions does not make soft perennialism more critically sound. At the same time, Taylor deserves credit for accepting critique graciously and for engaging in scholarly debate in a vigorous and constructive manner. His approach may not make as much progress as one might hope on the difficult challenge of understanding human spirituality; as a new variant of perennialism rising in response to critiques of Wilber's work, Taylor has retained many of the key shortcomings of perennialism. On the other hand, if his writings can provide inspiration and acceptance of diversity among popular readers in this subject area, then they serve a worthy cause—despite falling short on scholarship and remaining outside of psychology.

There is also some contribution to scholarship even in soft perennialism. Wilber's work explicated a perennialist position so thoroughly that he generated careful critical examination of this strategy, and thereby largely dispelled the notion that such an approach might still hold some promise for psychology (Hartelius, 2015a). Taylor has extended this contribution by inviting consideration of an idea also advanced by Blackstone (2006), namely of a pervasive, immanent spiritual force as the source of spiritual experience. It seems likely this soft perennialist option will not be much more successful within psychology than Wilber's version, but it has taken Taylor's exposition of this idea for the matter to be carefully reviewed. There is much scientific research that ends in blind alleys and cul de sacs, and the work that identifies these is no less important than that which results in breakthrough findings in other directions.

What deserves to be critiqued in Wilber and Taylor is the blurring of lines between psychology and religion. Even in what may be a postmetaphysical world populated by multiple knowledge frames, psychology cannot be radically reinvented without consideration of its historical and cultural contingencies. These contingencies are both its limitations and its ability to contain knowledge. The diversities of a multicultural world and the imperative

to understand the whole human person demand that existing containers of knowledge be carefully reshaped and enlarged in more inclusive ways—not only for moral and political reasons but also because this enhances the integrity of psychological knowledge (Hartelius, 2014b). Yet such work demands more critical discernment and rigor, not less.

For example, while it has become commonplace to suggest that religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, or Christianity constitute or include psychologies of some sort, it is important to make a distinction between formal and informal uses of the term. In an informal sense, it is accurate and respectful to acknowledge that these venerated systems often include hermeneutically useful frames, wise observations, and pragmatic practices for addressing issues of mind and heart, life and relationship (Friedman, 2017). This plainly does not make their metaphysical or soteriological constructs transferable into psychology, even though efforts to do just this persist (e.g., Crabb, 1981; cf. Friedman, 2009, 2010). Yet when Wilber (e.g., 2000) or Taylor (e.g., 2017b) blend New Age religions with psychological concepts, there is an implied claim that the entire product—including its explicitly religious ideas—is valid psychology in the formal sense of the academic and scientific discipline. This is inaccurate and misleading.

Taylor (2017b), as Wilber before him, has offered his New Age religion to the public as psychology, and has submitted his thought for publication in a transpersonal journal—an action that merits response from the field. In order to do so constructively, this journal has published Taylor's (2016) scholarly presentation of his work, notified him in advance that it would not be published without a critical response, and has offered him a generous forum for reply to this critique (Taylor, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). In addition, this journal has extended an invitation to interested scholars to join and broaden the conversation. The intent is both that Taylor should have a forum to present his ideas clearly and engage with critique, and that the larger conversation of relations between science and religious views might be revisited.

Scholarship should strive to be accurate, transparent, and fair. Direct and explicit critique of scholarly work is not attack, despite Taylor's (2017a) complaint; articulation of possible shortcomings, along with robust debate, is how any scholarly field betters itself. Taylor's concern that a critical response was published in the same issue is curious, given the fact that scholarly replies are frequently published in the same issue as target papers.

In the spirit of entirely conventional critique it can be noted that Taylor's work seems as yet somewhat in flux. For example, in his response Taylor (2017a) has acknowledged the metaphysical nature of the pervasive spirit force postulated in his approach, despite stating clearly in his 2016 paper that this force "is not metaphysical because it pervades the physical world" (p. 31). He claimed retrospectively (2017a) that he did not intend to imply that his approach does not make metaphysical claims, even though he had earlier avowed (2016) that it was "possible to advocate a softer form of perennialist approach without necessarily positing or adhering to a clearly defined metaphysical system" (pp. 19-20). In his (2016) initial presentation he offered his work as perennialist, then later (2017a) he has expressed interest in changing its identity to essentialist. His writing does not reflect a full awareness of the relationship between evidence and metaphysical speculation, or appreciate that the latter by definition cannot be evidence-based. This sort of problematic ambiguity has led to a concern about whether Taylor's advance into publishing popular books on his work as if it were psychology may have been premature (Hartelius, 2016). While Taylor (2017a) has characterized this concern as hostile, the fact that these basic issues are still being sorted out in his writing evidences the problem clearly enough; pointing to these issues is no more hostile than, say, copyediting. The question is not whether Taylor's work is shoddy, to use his own (2017a) term, but whether it has been adequately vetted in scholarly circles to warrant broad public circulation as a product of the scientific field of psychology.

Taylor's (2016) spiritual vision is uplifting, his conviction is admirable, and his interest in empirical evidence is commendable. His work in the phenomenological study of a particular type of experience may be important if properly validated. These merits do not save his soft perennialism from critical shortcomings that may well be insurmountable within his current framework. The proposal to rename his approach *essentialist phenomenology* does not change the structure of the work, which remains perennialist and metaphysical, with phenomenology playing only an ancillary role in a much larger schema. Neither adjustments in terminology nor minor updates and expansions of Taylor's selective literature review will remedy this. His case is not strengthened by empirical evidence that merely permits rather than supports his speculative ideas. Since these ideas are already problematic

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on other grounds, and because better explanations exist, the case for his version of perennialism remains largely unconvincing. Perennialist spiritual philosophies remain unworkable within psychology, and Taylor's version is no exception.

One might ask why Taylor even wishes to situate his work within psychology—why his most recent book, for example, is subtitled, *The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening* (Taylor, 2017b)—when his writings reflect such deep suspicion of neuroscientific explanations and minimal regard for scholarly standards of what constitutes evidence. The role of spiritual teacher, as exemplified by Eckhart Tolle who has written the introduction to his book, is perfectly respectable and more in keeping with the substance and thrust of Taylor's efforts. What deserves careful scrutiny is occasions when a spiritual teacher inappropriately incorporates a bit of scientific research into a spiritual vision and then offers the resulting product as psychology. It is doubtful that bad science makes for better spirituality. However, Taylor would encounter no critique here if he were to refrain from representing his vision as some version of psychology, which it clearly is not. Transpersonal psychology has been down this same road with Ken Wilber's work, which ended with a popularized metaphysical theory of everything that has little credibility within the serious scholarship of any discipline, let alone psychology. The field would do well to apply lessons learned from this history to Taylor's new version of much the same approach.

There is richness, depth, and subtlety to the human person that psychology attempts but often fails to fully capture. These omissions, though sometimes peripheral from the perspective of psychology, are often central to what motivates, inspires, and transforms human life. Transpersonal approaches to the mind and to states of consciousness hold the opportunity and perhaps even the responsibility to contribute somatic, phenomenal, relational, and transformative facets to the wider discipline; doing so may support a broadening of psychology so that it becomes less focused on the Western individual and more inclusive of the whole human person and of broader ranges of communities and cultures. Perhaps it will become possible to acknowledge that perennialist strategies such as those of Wilber and Taylor, while seeming an appealing shortcut to such goals, have failed to deliver. Efforts invested in inventing and defending new versions of this ephemeral, universalizing grand theory approach (cf. Wright, 1996) might be better

spent developing more specific work that can contribute to the field modestly, pragmatically, and in socially engaged ways (cf. Brooks, 2010; Ferrer, 2011a; Friedman, 2015).

In this process, transpersonal psychology requires active debate in order to progress, just as any other academic field. The values that it needs to live up to are scholarly, not spiritual, because it is a psychology, not a religious movement. The field examines mystical, spiritual, and other exceptional human experiences and capacities in a scientific frame at least partly corrected for artificial prejudices introduced by unacknowledged modernist assumptions. As such, transpersonal psychology strives for inclusion of viewpoints, cultures, traditions, genders, ways of knowing, and varieties of lived experience, but not for the incorporation of New Age religions—or any other religions—as a part of psychology.

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