



9-1-2017

Keeping the Account Open: On Metaphysical Mistrust in Transpersonal Psychology (A Response to Hartelius, 2017)

Steve Taylor

Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), [Theory and Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Transpersonal Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Taylor, S. (2017). Keeping the account open: On metaphysical mistrust in transpersonal psychology (A response to Hartelius, 2017). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.111>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

This Special Topic 2 Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Newsletters at Digital Commons @ CIIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Transpersonal Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CIIS. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ciis.edu.

Keeping the Account Open: On Metaphysical Mistrust in Transpersonal Psychology (A Response to Hartelius, 2017)

Steve Taylor

Leeds Beckett University
Leeds, UK

In response to Hartelius (2017), I suggest that the evidence for perennialism or essentialism can be tested, and is publicly accessible, through engagement with the spiritual practices that have given rise to cross-cultural mystical experiences with common characteristics. This suggests that essentialism could be included in transpersonal psychology (and psychology in general). I suggest that there is no reason why transpersonal psychology should exclude metaphysical claims, as long as they are inferred or implied by research and evidence, explicitly stated and viewed as secondary. It is impossible to avoid metaphysics, and it is important for transpersonal psychologists (and all psychologists and scientists in general) to be explicit about their metaphysical assumptions.

Keywords: *perennialism, essentialism, metaphysics, science*

I am grateful for the extensive response Hartelius (2017) has made to my essay, “The Return of Perennial Perspectives? Why Transpersonal Psychology Should Remain Open to Essentialism” (Taylor, 2017a). This ongoing dialogue has stimulated me to further develop and clarify my ideas and to conduct further research in these areas.

In this response, I further defend the view that there is no reason why transpersonal psychologists should refrain from stating metaphysical positions, so long as these are secondary, and are inferred or implied by phenomenological evidence and with more research proposed to test a hypothesis. It is artificial to attempt to refrain from making metaphysical claims, and important not to conceive of science as an objective, non-metaphysical domain that only includes phenomena or concepts that can be falsified.

In any case, it may not be valid to assume that the evidence for perennialism or essentialism cannot be tested, and is not publicly accessible. It *can* be tested, and *is* accessible to investigation, through engagement with the spiritual practices that have given rise to cross-cultural mystical experiences with common characteristics. It may therefore be unreasonable to exclude essentialism from transpersonal psychology (and psychology in general). In these terms, perennialism does not necessarily lie outside science and psychology, and soft perennialism should not be seen as a New Age religion (as Hartelius has suggested).

One of the traditional aims of transpersonal psychology is to explore the farther reaches of human nature, expansive areas of potential human experience that are obscure, and may be difficult to frame linguistically or conceptually (such as mystical experiences in which one experiences a sense of oneness with the world). To view these areas as metaphysical and attempt to exclude them is possibly therefore contrary to the historical principles of the field. In this response, I will also describe why I disagree with Hartelius’ comparison of soft perennialism to creationism and intelligent design.

The Perennial Perspective

The main aim of Taylor (2017a) was to make a strong defense of the perennial perspective. A case was made that there is ample evidence for a common core of essential characteristics of awakening experiences (as explorations and interpretations of the same expansive landscape of potential human experience). As a result, it was argued that an experiential perennialist (or essentialist) outlook is valid and necessary. At the same time it was shown that other potential arguments to account for these commonalities—such as cultural transmission and neurology—are weak.

Hartelius (2017) has remarked that “Whether or not a handful of contemporary academics support perennialist or essentialist positions does not make soft perennialism more critically sound” (p. 104). However, there is a little more to it than this. For

example, as suggested in Taylor (2017a), some of the most convincing evidence of a perennial experiential landscape comes from cross-cultural studies using Hood's quantitative measure, the M-Scale. These studies have shown that the same characteristics occur across different traditions, as well as outside those traditions. In addition, academics such as Studstill (2005) and Rose (2016) have made extremely detailed comparative investigations of contemplative traditions, which may not be easily refuted. It is also important to remember that these scholars' arguments in favor of perennialism is just one aspect of the overall case. For example, in my previous response, evidence was presented from near-death experiences, reports of post-traumatic growth (or post-traumatic transformation) and from individuals who were naturally awakened without being familiar with spiritual traditions. Arguments against the contextualist theory of mystical experiences were also put forward.

I appreciate it may not be possible for Hartelius to respond to every point I made in my previous response, but let me repeat my argument that previous critiques of perennialism (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Hartelius, 2015) largely only dealt with a straw man of traditional hard perennialism, without looking at some more nuanced theories from contemporary scholars. Hartelius again argues that it is problematic that spiritual traditions describe non-ordinary experiences inconsistently, but his discussion of spiritual diversity needs to account for two different issues. First, there is the distinction between popular religion and the contemplative traditions that may be associated with them, such as between popular Christianity and Christian mysticism, between conventional Islam and Sufism, or between popular Hinduism and Yoga or Vedanta. Schuon (1984) framed this as a distinction between exoteric and esoteric traditions. Wilber (2000) has made a similar distinction between conventional translative religion and transformative contemplative traditions. In Taylor (2017b) the same distinction has been described in terms of conventional religion which consoles and compensates the ego, and mystical traditions that encourage one to transcend the ego. Obviously, these distinctions are not cut and dried, but it is important to take them into account, since scholars of religion generally agree that the greatest diversity is found within exoteric or conventional religions, whereas the contemplative traditions have much greater commonalities.

The second issue that is relevant to Hartelius' discussion of spirituality diversity is that—as pointed out in Taylor (2017a)—diversity is much reduced in *phenomenological descriptions* of mystical experience (particularly those that occur outside the context specific spiritual traditions) compared to teachings or conceptual frameworks (Marshall, 2005). Scholars such as Forman (1999) and Marshall (2005) have suggested that Katz (1978) has made the error of comparing teachings rather than actual accounts of mystical experiences. Narratives and beliefs may be significantly diverse; and the experiences and practices associated with popular or exoteric religion may be diverse; but there is significantly more commonality in the experiences and practices associated with contemplative traditions.

Explanations and Correlations

In Taylor (2017a) I described the attempt to account for mystical experiences in neurological factors as a form of neuroscientific reductionism. Three problematic areas were highlighted: the hard problem of explaining any conscious experience in terms of neurological factors, the lack of direct and reliable correspondence between mental and neural activity, and anomalous experiences such as NDEs and terminal lucidity, which suggest that consciousness is to some degree independent of the brain. Hartelius (2017a) has responded to this with an argument in favor of correlations between mental events and neural activity, stating that my approach involves “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” (p. 102).

However, in Taylor (2017a) I did not argue against a correlation but against an explanation. In this context, correlations do not denote neuroscientific reductionism, but explanations do. It is true that I have suggested, in a more general sense, that “neuroscience has yet to establish any reliable and consistent correspondence between specific mental states and specific patterns of neurological activity, which we would expect if the latter produced the former” (Taylor, 2017a, p. 80). But a reliable and consistent correspondence is a different matter from a correlation. It seems perfectly logical to assume that there may be associations between awakening experiences and certain patterns

of neurological activity, and with certain physiological changes, but this is not to say that they are reliable or consistent, or generalizable. I do not reject the possibility of neurological correlations. I simply argue that—at least as yet—there is no evidence of causation.

In Hartelius (2017a) some examples of correlations between states of consciousness and neurology and physiology have been provided, to justify the argument that “a neurobiological theory greatly reduces any urgent need for explanation by some form of perennialism, and is considerably more parsimonious” (p. 102). However, the neurological theories that have been put forward so far (such as Persinger, 1983, or Newberg & D’Aquilli, 2000) have proven woefully inadequate (Marshall, 2005; Kelly & Grosso, 2007; Aen-Stockdale, 2012). It is possible that a much more satisfactory theory may emerge in the future, but these previous efforts do not inspire confidence. Any such theory would also have to surmount the “hard problem.”

Hartelius (2017a) has gone to great lengths to defend reductionism in general, stating that “the mere fact that a process involves some reduction should not make it immediately suspect” (p. 102). I completely agree with this. Reductionism is often useful, and sometimes necessary, such as when, in Hartelius’ (2017a) words, “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*” (p. 102). However, my argument was not against reductionism in general, only against *neuroscientific reductionism*. The argument is only that reductionism has not proven up to the task of explaining spiritual or mystical experiences.

Metaphysical Mistrust

Hartelius’ (2017a) position is that “perennialism is a metaphysical philosophy of spirituality whereas psychology is an empirical study of the human mind and its expression” (p. 79). In other words, perennialism has no place in psychology. However, simply deeming perennialism to be metaphysical does not invalidate it. If the evidence for it is convincing, and cannot be adequately refuted, then it should be included within the parameters of psychology, rather than excluded on ideological grounds.

One could compare this to how a scientist might react to evidence for psychic phenomena. Imagine a tightly controlled, methodologically sound experiment

that shows a statistically significant effect for telepathy or precognition. Ideally, a scientist would carefully review the study, and if he or she deemed it convincing, cautiously accept that there appears to be evidence of an unexplained phenomenon. However, past examples indicate that this ideal scenario does not often occur. For example, in (2011) Bem published a paper called “Feeling the Future” in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, detailing the results of 9 experiments involving more than 1000 participants, eight of which showed significant statistical evidence for precognition and premonition. However, prominent skeptics were outraged, and dismissed Bem’s findings out of hand. For example, Hyman described the results, as “pure craziness ... an embarrassment for the entire field” (in Carr, 2011, p. 2). In other words, skeptics were unwilling to consider the evidence on ideological grounds.

In some respects, Hartelius’ position is quite simple and logical: science does not deal with metaphysics; transpersonal psychology should strive to be a science, and therefore should be free of metaphysics. In his view, soft perennialism is a metaphysical claim and should not therefore be presented as a psychological theory. The subtitle of my recent book (*The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening* [Taylor, 2017b]) is therefore misleading, since it does not actually discuss psychology (although note that the soft perennialist model is not presented in this book, nor in any other of my popular books. Indeed, I have not discussed transpersonal psychology directly in any of my books.)

However, the relationship between metaphysics and science may be more complicated and nuanced than this. Science and metaphysics (and by association religion) are not discrete and independent areas. Hartelius has an intense faith in the (relative) objectivity and reliability of science and a correspondingly jaundiced attitude to metaphysics. In his view, soft perennialism fits neatly into the category of metaphysics, whereas psychology (and the kind of transpersonal psychology advocated by Hartelius) fits into the category of science.

First of all, one may consider the contention that perennialism lies outside science and psychology, and therefore belongs to the category of religion. I agree with Hartelius’ (2017) statement that psychological ideas should not 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” (p. 93). However, I do not believe that this applies to soft perennialism. I think that it is possible to find direct evidence—or public evidence—for essentialism. For example, consider the case that has been made for essential aspects of mystical experience by scholars such as Studstill (2005) and Rose (2016), and the evidence for these accumulated by cross-cultural studies using Hood’s M-scale. This is evidence that certainly can be examined by anyone who is prepared to follow the transformative practices and processes discussed by Studstill (2005; specifically, those of Dzogchen and medieval German mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Suso and Tauler) or by Rose (2016; specifically, those of Theravada Buddhism, Patañjalian Yoga, and Catholic mystical theology). In the same way, anyone is free to “test” the evidence of the cross-cultural studies of the M-Scale by engaging with diverse spiritual practices, and ascertaining whether they develop the characteristics highlighted by the scale.

In this sense, the evidence for essentialism can be examined. Therefore, in accordance with Hartelius’ own definition, it is not a metaphysical claim. One certainly does not just have to accept essentialism based on tradition and authority, as Hartelius (2017) has suggested. That may be true of some facets of conventional or exoteric religion, but not in relation to contemplative traditions that emphasize direct, first-hand experience and verification for oneself. This form of phenomenological perennialism does therefore belong within the remit of psychology. In consequence, it is not a New Age religion.

An argument against the above point might be that the common core of mystical experiences—or what I have described as a landscape of expansive potential human experience (Taylor, 2016, 2017)—is not immediately and directly available to everyone. This is probably true, but to dismiss the common core theory on these grounds would be illogical, like deciding that there is no evidence for a landscape’s existence because only a small proportion of the population have travelled there and explored it. It is also an attitude that privileges ordinary consciousness (a state in which human beings do not generally have ready access to the common core characteristics) over other modes. Traditionally, transpersonal and spiritual attitudes have held that everyday awareness is limited to some degree, and that

certain practices and paths allow cultivation of a more expansive awareness, opening one up to wider and deeper realities. So to disregard these wider and deeper realities because they are not immediately accessible could be construed as contravening the traditional principles of transpersonal psychology, and of spiritual traditions in general.

Since the landscape of expansive potential human experience is accessible—even if not readily so—and so can be directly experienced, it does potentially conform to James’s (1904) concept of radical empiricism. If it is metaphysical in the sense Hartelius (2017) has used the term (in the sense of not being immediately and directly accessible) this is only in relation to ordinary consciousness—the ordinary consciousness that, according to the principles of spiritual traditions, is limited, and should be expanded and intensified.

On a more general point, I believe that Hartelius (2017) has too readily associated metaphysical claims with religion. Because I have made metaphysical claims (Taylor, 2017) he has accused me of propagating a New Age religion. But while religion certainly does include metaphysical claims, religion and metaphysics are not synonymous. One does not become religious as soon as one makes a metaphysical claim. In practice, metaphysical claims are often made outside the domain of religion—as will presently become clear, when the relationship between science and metaphysics is discussed. (As noted above, the fact that perennialism can be placed within the remit of psychology also suggests that it is not a New Age religion.)

Soft perennialism is a provocative theory suggested by a range of evidence from various sources, including mystical texts, anthropological reports of indigenous cultures, and reports of spiritual experiences or other transformative experiences. It is not a wholly abstract or conceptual (or religious) metaphysical claim, but one that I believe is to some extent empirical. Note that I use the term *suggested* rather than proven. I agree that the theory is speculative. But I think there is a valid case to be made for it, which merits serious debate. And the best way of refuting soft perennialism is not to dismiss it as metaphysical, but to engage with the evidence, and examine whether it supports the claim. If there was a good case for refuting my interpretation of the evidence then I would, of course, be willing to revise my views.

Science and Metaphysics

Hartelius (2017) has restated that concepts can be deemed metaphysical (and hence in his view nonscientific) if they “cannot be independently verified or falsified” (p. 99). However, this ignores the issue of whether it is invalid and outmoded to use falsification and verification as criteria to distinguish between science and metaphysics (Taylor, 2017a). Most contemporary philosophers of science recognize that it is “far too simplistic to make a distinction between falsifiable science and unfalsifiable metaphysics” (Taylor, 2017a, p. 83). Most theories gain credence through accumulating evidence over a long period of time—that is, through confirmation rather than falsification (Kelly, 2015; Chalmers, 1979). If one thinks in terms of confirmation rather than falsification, and in terms of the importance of accumulating evidence, one could envisage how psychic phenomena such as telepathy or precognition could eventually be deemed scientifically valid, by way of successful trials and replicated results. The same could be true of perennialism, or essentialism. If sufficient evidence is deemed to have been accumulated via studies such as those using Hood’s M-Scale and other forms of quantitative and qualitative research, there is no reason why the concept should not be seen as scientifically valid.

The issue here is testing. It must be seen if, over time, the evidence supports soft perennialism or does not. It is surely good scientific practice to allow a hypothesis the opportunity to establish itself. Again, note that I am not promoting soft perennialism as a proven psychological theory, only as a hypothesis which can be further investigated.

The same is true of the claim of an all-pervading spiritual force. Even this—which I admit is a metaphysical step beyond essentialism itself, and even more of a speculation, but one that is still suggested by some evidence—could become a scientifically acceptable concept if it were supported by enough evidence. At any rate, the claim could be refined by more detailed investigation of the data—or alternatively, become refuted if a good case were made against it.

I suspect that part of the issue here may be my use of the term “spiritual force.” It may be that if I had used a more neutral term such as “consciousness” (Chalmers, 1996) or “field of awareness” (Forman, 1998, p. 185) then this claim would not have been deemed so controversial by Hartelius. (Indeed, as will be seen shortly, Hartelius,

2015, has himself made a very similar claim while using the term consciousness.)

Another relevant issue here is the metaphysical basis of science. While in Taylor (2017a) it was argued that science may be strongly underpinned by metaphysical concepts, Hartelius (2017) has argued that there is a question of degree here, and that the metaphysical underpinnings of science are likely to be much less significant than those of religion. He has spoken of “the unavoidable presence of *some* metaphysical assumptions” but has suggested that this is not equivalent to creating systems that “rely *substantively and uncritically* on grand universal assumptions that are untestable by any empirical means” (Hartelius, 2017, p. 103, italics in original).

I agree with Hartelius that there are degrees of uncritical acceptance of assumptions and that some metaphysical systems may be more informed by these. In practice, however, science often does include grand theories and scientists are often prone to making metaphysical statements. Science is frequently underpinned by *scientism*—that is, the belief system of scientific materialism (Sheldrake, 2012). Materialist monism is surely a grand theory, insisting that matter is the primary reality, and including assumptions that consciousness is produced by the brain, and that evolution can be explained solely in terms of random mutations and natural selection. Whilst they are derived from some scientific findings, these are assumptions that cannot be tested or proven. How would it be possible to prove that consciousness is produced by the brain, or that consciousness ends with the death of the body? In other words, there is not necessarily evidence of false equivalence here.

Frequently, adherents of materialist monism make metaphysical statements, while believing that they are speaking from a basis of scientific objectivity. One example of this is Francis Crick’s “astonishing hypothesis” that “You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules” (Crick, 1994, p. 3). The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has waxed metaphysical throughout his books—for example, when he has described human beings as “lumbering robots” and “survival machines,” nothing more than vehicles for genes whose “preservation is the ultimate rationale for

our existence” (Dawkins, 1976, p. 21). Another example is the psychologist Nicholas Humphrey’s assertion that “materialism is to all intents and purposes the fact of life” (1995, p. 54).

I agree with Hartelius (2017) that, “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” (p. 103). However, as the above quotes show, in practice such a surrender does often occur.

Hartelius' Own Metaphysical Position

The above metaphysical statements from scientists illustrate how difficult it is to eschew metaphysics, and brings me back to the subject of Hartelius’ own metaphysical position. When Hartelius has described participatory philosophy as suggesting, for example, that “consciousness in some form penetrates through all physicality” (Hartelius, 2015, p. 26), I would argue that this qualifies as a metaphysical statement. In fact, I would argue that it does not differ greatly from the description in Taylor (2016) of an all-pervading spiritual force. Other aspects of participatory philosophy’s view of the world, as described by Hartelius & Ferrer (2015)—for example, as a dynamic open-ended system with no duality between subject and object, and the human mind and the natural world being of the same nature—also probably qualify as metaphysical claims, by Hartelius’ own criteria. (Perhaps Hartelius would suggest that these claims are not as substantively metaphysical as soft perennialism, but this is debatable.)

This relates to my point about the inevitability of holding some kind of interpretative metaphysical position in relation to mystical experiences. This is partly because mystical experiences often bring a powerful sense of revelation, a sense that one has made contact with a deeper level of reality, that necessitates interpretation of some form. In other words, such experiences inevitably give rise to questions about the nature of reality. As Marshall (2015) has pointed out, since one cannot escape some kind of metaphysical perspective towards mystical experiences, it is surely advisable to be explicit about this. Ferrer’s (2017) insistence on the undetermined nature of the mystery could be interpreted as a reluctance to disclose his own metaphysics, due to his view that transpersonal psychology should eschew metaphysics. In a similar way, Hartelius’ metaphysical position is unclear. While

his broader metaphysical outlook appears to conform to participatory philosophy, his attitude to mystical experiences shows signs of neuroscientific reductionism and contextualism (Marshall, 2015; Taylor, 2017a).

As stated in Taylor (2016, 2017a) my view is that there is no reason why one should refrain from making metaphysical claims, so long as these are secondary, explicitly stated, and are inferred or implied by phenomenological evidence, rather than being abstract or conceptual. In fact, in some senses, this may actually benefit the scientific enterprise, rather than hinder it. I will illustrate this point with an example from quantum physics.

Logical Positivism and Quantum Physics

In 1952, many of the world’s leading quantum physicists met in Copenhagen, to discuss the construction of a particle accelerator in Europe. There, an instructive conversation took place between Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr and Wolfgang Pauli, on the subject of metaphysics. Bohr had recently given a talk about quantum physics to a group of logical positivist philosophers, an experience he described as a “terrible disappointment” (Heisenberg, 1971, p. 208). Although he endorsed the positivists’ emphasis on conceptual clarity, he remarked that “Their prohibition of any discussion of the wider issues, simply because we lack clear-cut enough concepts in this realm, does not seem very useful to me—this same ban would prevent your understanding of quantum theory” (Heisenberg, 1971, p. 208).

Heisenberg voiced similar misgivings, commenting that:

Positivists are extraordinarily prickly about all problems having what they call a prescientific character. I remember a book by Philipp Frank on causality, in which he dismisses a whole series of problems and formulations on the grounds that all of them are relics of the old metaphysics, vestiges from the period of prescientific or animistic thought...To him ‘metaphysic’ is a synonym for ‘loose thinking’ and hence a term of abuse (Heisenberg, 1971, p. 208).

Bohr had encountered Phillip Frank at this talk, and described him as using “the term metaphysics as a kind of swearword, or at best, as a euphemism for unscientific thought” (Heisenberg, 1971, p. 209). (I think there are

some similarities with Hartelius' attitude to metaphysics here.)

Later the same day, Heisenberg and Wolfgang Pauli talked alone, and both agreed on the importance of examining obscure metaphysical areas where language and meaning were unclear. As Heisenberg remarked, "Where must we seek for the truth, in obscurity or in clarity? Niels has quoted Schiller's 'Truth dwells in the deeps.' Are there such deeps and is there any truth? And may these deeps perhaps hold the meaning of life and death?" (Heisenberg, 1971, p. 211).

It is interesting that these three eminent scientists believed that metaphysical ideas were an important part of the scientific enterprise, and freely explored them. More than sixty years ago, they were opposed to distinctions of the kind that Hartelius (2017) and also Friedman (2013) make between the unscientific and scientific, and believed that such a distinction would negate an understanding of quantum theory. In fact, in Taylor (2017a) I have suggested that Hartelius' (and Friedman's) negative attitude to metaphysics is reminiscent of (although admittedly not as extreme as) logical positivist philosophy. I have also suggested that such an attitude may deprive transpersonal psychology of significant data—exactly as the three physicists above believed in relation to science in general.

Why should one be limited to what is commonly and immediately accessible to consciousness and disregard certain experiences or concepts simply because they are unfalsifiable? I do not think it is reasonable to deny theorists the right of making metaphysical speculations, as long as these are carefully justified, and with more research proposed to test the hypothesis.

To consider what is beyond the falsifiable does not mean that one immediately ceases to be a scientist. There is no clearly demarcated point where scientists suddenly become metaphysicians, simply because they have allowed themselves to ponder over the ontological implications of their findings. Surely science is not simply a matter of examining and collecting data, but also a matter of creating theories based on that data.

It would be difficult to argue that Heisenberg, Pauli and Bohr were not valid scientists. This also applies to the large number of psychologists who considered metaphysical ideas, including William James, Jung, and transpersonal psychologists such as Maslow, Assagioli and Grof. According to Hartelius' criteria (as applied to myself, Wilber and Blackstone) it would be more accurate

to view these figures as spiritual teachers (and the creators of New Age religions) rather than psychologists.

Hierarchy

Let me briefly respond to the criticism that Hartelius (2017) has made of the allegedly hierarchical nature of soft perennialism. This criticism was first raised by Ferrer (2002) in connection with traditional perennialism. This can be framed in terms of the distinction described earlier between esoteric and exoteric religion. Rightly in my view, Ferrer (2002) has suggested that Schuon (1984) and other perennialists privilege the esoteric over the exoteric, implying that the outward conventional forms of religion are a pale shadow of the mystical core, in which transcendent universals express themselves. Or, as Hartelius (2017) has framed this point in relation to soft perennialism, "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" (p. xv, italics in original).

However, although it is easy to see how this criticism could apply to hard perennialists like Schuon (1975) and Huxley (1945), in my view, it is less relevant to soft perennialism, which allows for a great deal of diversity, and does not privilege any particular spiritual expression over any other. This is one of the ways in which it resembles Ferrer's (2002, 2017) participatory philosophy. As noted in Taylor (2016), soft perennialism sees (in Hick's, 1989, terminology) indigenous pre-axial and post-axial spiritual traditions as equally valid. Soft perennialism allows for an immanent spirituality that expresses itself with equal validity in many diverse forms, none of which are higher or more valuable any other.

Ferrer (2017) has made a similar criticism in specific relation to the concept of an all-pervading spiritual force. He has suggested that soft perennialism privileges an essential spiritual force over metaphysical depictions of that force, thus creating a hierarchical framework. However, in my view, there is no reason why an interpretation or conception of spirit-force that is more laden with cultural and metaphysical constructs (such as a Christian or Jewish mystic's concept of God) should be seen as less valuable than one that is apparently less constructed (such as the Lakota concept of *wakan-tanka*

or the Ainu of Japan's concept of *ramut*). Here one could make an analogy with food. Certain foods may be eaten raw; in other meals, raw foods may be processed, cooked and combined in different ways. This does not mean that raw food is superior to cooked food. One could just as easily switch the hegemony around and suggest that the processed and cooked food is superior to the raw. Any hierarchical interpretation here is surely in the eye of the beholder.

False Equivalence

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Hartelius' (2017) response is the comparison of soft perennialism to intelligent design, creationism, and a New Age religion. In order to evaluate this argument further, let us return to Hartelius' (2017) view that I have used a postmodernist type of false equivalence to compare the metaphysics of science to those of religion, since in practice science is (according to Hartelius' argument) less influenced by metaphysical ideas and assumptions. I believe that in comparing soft perennialism to intelligent design, Hartelius (2017) may be indulging in a similar notion of false equivalence. To claim that soft perennialism is similar to intelligent design because both are partly evidence-based, and both stem from an interpretation of evidence, could also be taken as an example of the application of the post-truth, postmodernist perspective.

There are obviously degrees and types of evidence, as Hartelius has pointed out, in the same way that there are degrees of metaphysical influence. Creationism is based on the wilful misinterpretation and fabrication of evidence, and to compare this to a theory derived from empirical evidence from a wide variety of sources and other scholars seems unjust. To compare soft perennialism to creationism does not take account of the various arguments for a perennial perspective made in Taylor (2016) and (2017)—for example, from the various studies using Hood's M-Scale, studies into the after-effects of near-death experiences, into the characteristics of post-traumatic growth, the conclusions of scholars such as Studshill (2005) and Rose (2016) based on their examinations of spiritual texts and reports of mystical experiences, evidence from my own research, and so on. Soft perennialism is not based on ideology, myth or tradition. Although provocative and speculative, it is not fabricated, but to some extent empirically based, and therefore not equivalent to creationism, or a new age religion.

Hartelius (2017) is right to caution against "highly selective readings of empirical evidence" (p. 82) and he is also right to distinguish between evidence for an experience, and the interpretation of that experience. But an interpretation can, of course, make a claim for validity if it is based on evidence, and is supported by multiple sources and studies—as I believe is the case with the soft perennialism model, and essentialism in general.

Conclusion

I fully understand that Hartelius has developed his own vision of transpersonal psychology that he is encouraging others to adopt. However, I believe that transpersonal psychology should be as inclusive as possible, and be open to multiple perspectives. I do not see why soft perennialism cannot coexist with Hartelius' own perspective, and multiple other perspectives. (After all, this pluralism is fully in accordance with the participatory philosophy that Hartelius has advocated.) It is surely healthy for such scholarly diversity to coexist within the same field.

I also understand that Hartelius is keen to exclude metaphysical claims from transpersonal psychology so that the field may be taken more seriously by mainstream psychologists and scientists. Perhaps this would be the case, but one should be aware of the consequences of this. By limiting itself in the way that Hartelius (2017) and Friedman (2013) have recommended, transpersonal psychology would surely be turning away from the farther reaches of human nature, and disregarding a massive amount of potentially interesting and important data that lies there. Surely, as Heisenberg remarked above, these obscure areas should be explored. As the mystical scholar Evelyn Underhill (1932) wrote, "We may be sure that vast regions of existence lie beyond our sensory range; and that the world invisible includes grades and kinds of being of which we are unable to conceive" (p. 6). This recalls William James' (1986) famous comment—from which I have adapted the title of this essay—that "our normal waking consciousness...is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different...No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded" (p. 388).

I would suggest that a form of transpersonal psychology that includes metaphysical speculations (as

long as they are inferred by evidence and are not seen as central, and are explicitly stated) and that is open to perennial perspectives could fit very well within the context of the scientifically oriented, empirically-based form of transpersonal psychology that Hartelius has envisaged—and indeed, that it will actually enhance and extend the field in its diversity.

Much to his credit, Hartelius (2017) encouraged further debate into these issues, and I look forward to responses from other transpersonal psychologists.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Paul Marshall, Kelly Kilrea, Les Lancaster, Ellis Linders and David Lawton for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

References

- Aaen-Stockdale, C. (2012). Neuroscience for the soul. *The Psychologist*, 25(7), 520–523
- Bem, D. J. (2011). Feeling the future: Experimental evidence for anomalous retroactive influences on cognition and affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 407–425. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021524>
- Carr, B. (2011). Heresies and paradigm shifts. *The Network Review*, Spring 2011, 2–4.
- Chalmers, A. F. (1979). *What is this thing called science?: An assessment of the nature and status of science and its methods*. Brisbane, Australia: University of Queensland Press.
- Chalmers, D. J. (1996). *The conscious mind: In search of a fundamental theory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Crick, F. (1994). *The astonishing hypothesis*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Ferrer, J. N. (2002). *Revisioning transpersonal theory: A participatory vision of human spirituality*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ferrer, J. N. (2017). *Participation and the mystery*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Forman, R. (1998). What does mysticism have to teach us about consciousness? *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 5(2), 185–201.
- Forman, R. K. C. (1999). *Mysticism, mind, consciousness*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Friedman, H. L. (2013). The role of science in transpersonal psychology. In H. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of transpersonal psychology* (pp. 300–311). Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118591277.ch16>
- Hartelius, G. (2015). A startling new role for Wilber's integral model; or how I learned to stop worrying and love perennialism—A response to Abramson. *Transpersonal Psychology Review*, 17(1), 25–37.
- Hartelius, G. (2017). Zombieperennialism: An intelligent design for psychology? (Editor's introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36(2), 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.93>
- Hartelius, G., & Ferrer, J. N. (2013). Transpersonal philosophy: The participatory turn. In H. L. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of transpersonal psychology* (pp. 187–202). Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118591277.ch10>
- Heisenberg, W. (1971). *Physics and beyond*. London, UK: Allen & Unwin.
- Hick, J. (1989). *An interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Humphrey, N. (1995). *Soul searching: Human nature and supernatural belief*. London, UK: Random House. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230371286>
- Huxley, A. (1945). *The perennial philosophy*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Katz, S. T. (1978). *Mysticism and philosophical analysis*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kelly, E. H., & Grosso, M. (2007). Mystical experience. In W. H. Kelly, E. Kelly, A. Crabtree, M. Gauld, M. Grosso, & B. Greyson (Eds.), *Irreducible mind: Toward a psychology for the 21st century* (pp. 495–575). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kelly, E. (2015). Toward a worldview grounded in science and spirituality. In E. F. Kelly, A. Crabtree, & P. Marshall (Eds.), *Beyond physicalism: Toward reconciliation of science and spirituality* (pp. 493–552). London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- James, W. (1904). Does “consciousness” exist? *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 1, 477–491 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2011942>
- James, W. (1986). *The varieties of religious experience*. London, UK: Penguin. (Original work published 1902)

- Marshall, P. (2005). *Mystical encounters with the natural world: Experiences and explanations*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199279438.001.0001>
- Marshall, P. (2014). Mystical experience and metaphysics. Supplementary material to Mystical experiences as windows on reality. In E. F. Kelly, A. Crabtree, & P. Marshall (Eds.), *Beyond physicalism: Toward reconciliation of science and spirituality* (pp. 39–78). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Available at http://www.esalen.org/sites/default/files/resource_attachments/Ch-2-Supp-MEM.pdf
- Newberg, A & D'Aquili, E. (2000). The neuropsychology of religious and spiritual experience. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7 (11–12), 251–266.
- Persinger, M.A (1983). Religious and mystical experiences as artefacts of temporal lobe function: a general hypothesis. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 57(3:2), 1255–1262. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.1983.57.3f.1255>
- Rose, K. (2016). *Yoga, meditation, and mysticism: Contemplative universals and meditative landmarks*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Schuon, F. (1984). *The transcendent unity of religions*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.
- Sheldrake, R. (2012). *The science delusion*. London, UK: Coronet.
- Studstill, R. (2005). *The unity of mystical traditions: The transformations of consciousness in Tibetan and German mysticism*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Taylor, S. (2016). From philosophy to phenomenology: The argument for a “soft” perennialism. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 35(2), 17–41. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2016.35.2.17>
- Taylor, S. (2017a). The return of perennial perspectives? Why transpersonal psychology should remain open to essentialism. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36(1), 75–92. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.75>
- Taylor, S. (2017b). *The leap: The psychology of spiritual awakening*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Underhill, E. (1932). *The golden sequence*. London, UK: Methuen.
- Wilber, K. (2000). *One taste*. Boston, MA: Shambhala
- MSc in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology distance-learning course, through the University of Middlesex. His previous papers have been published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, and the *Transpersonal Psychology Review*. His books include *The Fall*, *Waking From Sleep*, *Out of the Darkness*, and his new book, *The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening* (published as an Eckhart Tolle Edition). He is also the author of two books of poetic meditations, including *The Calm Center*. Website: www.stevenmtaylor.com

About the Author

Steve Taylor, PhD, is a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University, UK. He also teaches on the