



9-1-2017

Taylor's Soft Perennialism: Psychology or New Age Spiritual Vision?

Glenn Hartelius

California Institute of Integral Studies

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

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

Recommended Citation

Hartelius, G. (2017). Taylor's soft perennialism: Psychology or New Age spiritual vision?. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.136>



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.

Taylor's Soft Perennialism: Psychology or New Age Spiritual Vision?

Cover Page Footnote

NA

Taylor's Soft Perennialism: Psychology or New Age Spiritual Vision?

Glenn Hartelius

California Institute of Integral Studies
San Francisco, CA, USA

Taylor has responded to critiques of his soft perennialism model in relationship to what he has called *awakening experiences*. The fact that some individuals have this type of experience away from the context of religion or spirituality, according to soft perennialism, is explained by a sort of landscape of experience representing the diverse ways in which one may engage with and experience this essential beingness. While this inspiring vision could possibly be true, so also could numerous other speculations about ultimate reality; however, the evidence advanced in support of soft perennialism notion is not valid in the context of psychology, or of any scientific endeavor. Taylor's claims that his metaphysical schema is at least partly evidence-based appears to stem from an overly philosophical view of science and a misunderstanding of the nature of valid scientific evidence. As such, soft perennialism is not a psychological theory, but functions more as a New Age spiritual vision. Given that perennialist visions such as Wilber's have received long and careful scrutiny within the transpersonal field, and now play a reduced role, a sober assessment is that perennialist models belong more to the field's past than to its future. At the same time, Taylor's empirical research into a particular type of developmental transformation may contribute importantly.

Keywords: *soft perennialism, philosophy of science, metaphysics, valid evidence*

Taylor's (2016) paper on soft perennialism and my response (Hartelius, 2016a), both published in this journal, have generated several subsequent papers in a back and forth dialogue. My two prior responses (Hartelius, 2017a, 2017b) have addressed issues in perennialism more broadly; here these arguments will be applied directly to Taylor's work and his prior responses. This will necessarily entail some restatement of ideas expressed elsewhere.

A central point of concern with Taylor's (2016, 2017a, 2017b) position is his claim that his speculative metaphysical philosophy of spirituality is at least partially based on empirical evidence, and is empirically testable. Taylor has affirmed the importance of grounding and testing theories in scientific evidence, which is commendable among perennialist theorists. At the same time, the evidence advanced for his soft perennialism is not scientifically valid, but consists of speculative extrapolation supported by inadequate strategies such as circular reasoning. The worthy intention of creating a broadly inclusive philosophy of spirituality that is grounded in science and lived experience falls short as other perennialist models have, due to a wholesale

absence of valid evidence. This is the central and likely fatal weakness of soft perennialism as a psychological theory, one that renders other considerations moot.

Before engaging in the specifics of dialogue, it may be useful to step back and paraphrase Taylor's claims, as well as consider them in a psychology context. According to Taylor (2016), there are many varieties of spiritual experience, and some of these types of experience may occur outside of religious contexts. For example, he has claimed there is empirical evidence that what he has called *awakening experiences* can occur in entirely ordinary settings, experiences in which there is an intensification of awareness; a decreased sense of one's separate self and an increased sense of connectedness and union; enhanced inner stillness and equanimity; movement toward empathy, compassion, and altruism; a decrease in a sense of personal agency; and increased wellbeing (Taylor, 2016).

These awakening experiences can be explained as a shift from the conventional experiences of mundane life toward an experience that is more aligned with "the radiant, blissful nature of our deepest being" (Taylor, 2017c, p. 218), which constitutes an underlying

psychological or experiential realm (Taylor, 2016). Spiritual experiences, of course, occur in a variety of forms—a fact that in Taylor’s view cannot be explained either by neurobiology, cultural transmission, or conventional perennialist models that posit an objective transcendent spiritual dimension or goal. This diversity can, in his view, be explained as different ways of engaging with this radiant, all-pervasive spiritual force that is one’s very own nature, and that can be felt as such. This, for Taylor, is the actual source of all spiritual experiences in all traditions, and it functions as a sort of landscape of potential spiritual experiences and goals. Though this force is immanent rather than ultimate, it may be perceived as ultimate in some traditions.

There have no doubt been tens of thousands of individual spiritual communities across humanity and throughout time, each with a slightly or greatly different spiritual practice or spiritual goal. Taylor’s (2016) approach implies that his account has uncovered the actual domain that is the essence of oneself, and that all of these varied traditions have encountered. While he has acknowledged that there are many different ways to engage with this essence, his position necessarily implies that the manner in which spiritual traditions understand and represent this all-pervading spirit-force is accurate to the degree their accounts align with his, and distorted to the degree that they diverge—even if he himself is tolerant of such divergences.

Yet for Taylor, this account is not only spiritually accurate, it is also scientifically accurate, and deserving of inclusion in psychology. This requires a fundamental and far-reaching revision of science and psychology to allow for the inclusion of large metaphysical claims, which Taylor trivializes on the basis that science itself necessarily implies some approximating assumptions of the nature of reality. Metaphysical claims such as Taylor’s should, he has argued, be accepted if they are “inferred or implied by phenomenological evidence and with more research proposed to test a hypothesis” (Taylor, 2017b, p. 111).

The soft perennialist idea Taylor has advanced offers an inspiring spiritual vision. The sources of Taylor’s model appear to stem from his own spiritual experiences beginning in his teenage years (Taylor, 2010), comparison of his experiences with metaphysically-inclined scholars of mysticism such as Eliade, Happold, Hoffman, Levy-Bruhl, Murti, Schuon, Smith, Spencer, Stace, Suzuki, Underhill, and Wilber (Taylor, 2016; it is noted that he does not always agree with the positions of these

scholars), and qualitative interviews with individuals who have had experiences that are resonant with his own (e.g., Taylor, 2012). His views appear to have taken shape over a period of years (cf. Taylor, 2005), and now seem fairly well developed.

While much of his approach is problematic within psychology, Taylor’s personal experiences, his process of coming to a spiritual understanding of reality that is likely shaped by these, and his desire to share this vision with others, is entirely consistent with the development of a spiritual teacher. In the contemporary world, as science and psychology have in many ways gained ascendancy over religion, it is not uncommon for some who function as spiritual teachers to position their work not so much as spiritual, but as a contribution to psychology (e.g., Blackstone, 2006; Wilber, 2000).

While a transpersonal approach strives for the inclusion of various aspects of the whole person that go beyond behavior, cognition, social relations, and neural activity, the incorporation of religious and metaphysical claims is not the province of any psychology, transpersonal or otherwise. Spiritual teachers should be warmly appreciated and encouraged to continue their important work outside of the context of psychology, or else to participate in psychology as psychology, rather than attempting to reformulate the discipline to accommodate their teachings. Efforts to insert religiously-toned doctrines into psychology should be firmly rejected.

This overview provides context for specific responses to Taylor on topics such as the nature of science, the limits of evidence, and the boundaries of psychology.

Taylor and the Nature of Science

A common refrain in transpersonal circles is that contemporary science is inadequately informed by philosophy. This leads to the automatic incorporation of reality assumptions from Western philosophy, such as atomistic materialism—the world is made of tiny discrete particles of matter—and Cartesianism—subjective experience is somehow a different kind of reality than matter. This has nevertheless proven to be a productive approximation of reality, and one can point to a great deal of empirical work that has produced results consistent with these assumptions. At the same time, this set of assumptions might not be equally effective for all phenomena, particularly those associated with living systems.

Taylor's view of science, on the other hand, may be philosophically overinformed to a degree that makes it incommensurable with the practical discipline. For example, he wishes to allow metaphysical claims within science, and to include metaphysical systems such as perennialism within psychology. In support of this he has argued that metaphysics are not merely present within science in a limited and unavoidable way, but pervasive within the discipline so that the reality assumptions typical of science stand on equal footing with those that inform his soft perennialism (Taylor, 2017a). Yet given that the philosophical assumptions present in science were sufficiently accurate within technological applications that the Space Shuttle program was able to build and successfully fly huge vehicles into Earth orbit and back, it seems awkward to claim that these assumptions are on par with a claim that spiritual experience of every kind derives from an all-pervasive spiritual force (Taylor, 2016). This latter claim not only is untestable in scientifically valid ways, but is merely one of numerous quite different accounts of ultimate reality offered just within perennialist thought (Hartelius, 2017b).

As noted, Taylor's concerns about science are not unfounded, and even Maslow held a critical stance toward some aspects of science. However, such critiques need to be made in the context of respect for the contributions of science and recognition of its continued ubiquity. Otherwise, like the anarchist who boards a city bus and travels down government-built streets to attend a rally in a publicly-maintained square, the critique outgrows any constructive role and approaches a horizon of absurdity. What can be observed with confidence is that Taylor's view of science is either absent from or an exceedingly small minority position within any scientific field.

Taylor (2017b) has argued 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" (p. 116). It can be noted that metaphysical positions are not testable hypotheses, because metaphysics are by definition untestable; further, while Taylor may personally infer his soft perennialism from experiential reports, the data do not naturally imply any such schema. There is no prohibition within science or psychology regarding the naming or discussion of metaphysical concepts, but theories that only work if certain far-reaching untestable metaphysical speculations

are assumed to be true generally fail at winning even cursory consideration. This is not some idiosyncratic notion invented by either Friedman (e.g., 2002, 2015) or myself, but rather a pragmatic fact of how scientific fields function. There is no suggestion that the implicit philosophy of science should be accepted uncritically; on the other hand, the presence of critique does not open the door to wholesale disregard for rigorous thought regarding the role and limits of metaphysics.

If transpersonal psychologists aspire mainly to form a Thursday night theosophical dinner club where one can wax eloquent on metaphysical theories of spirituality, then I heartily agree with Taylor that the field should embrace metaphysics of all kinds. On the other hand, if scholars in the transpersonal field wish to be part of the discipline of psychology, as the name implies, then this is an excellent reason to refrain from advancing metaphysical speculations as explanations of psychological experiences.

Taylor and the Limits of Evidence

Taylor (2017b) has asserted that his metaphysical claims are justified because they are suggested by his phenomenological data. Yet any number of different metaphysical theories could be extrapolated from a given set of phenomenological reports (cf. Hartelius, 2017a); the fact that Taylor has allegedly discovered evidence within such reports for his preexisting beliefs (e.g., Taylor, 2005, 2010), and has provided no evidence of bracketing these beliefs (identifying them and deliberately setting them aside), suggests that his positive findings may be at least in part the result of a robust confirmation bias. Metaphysical claims are metaphysical precisely because they cannot be validly tested by any means, phenomenological or otherwise; phenomenological results are not generalizable and are never used to test an hypothesis.

Taylor (2017b) has also asserted that perennialist claims are testable in other ways:

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). (p. 111)

This optimistic assessment is, unfortunately, entirely inaccurate, and it would seem that Taylor holds a rather atypical notion of what constitutes evidence in the setting of psychology or any other scientific field of study. A believer in a religion may, through adherence to certain practices and by means of encounter with certain experiences, come to a personal conviction that their path is the true path; but since individuals come to such convictions within a great number of different paths and practices, this fact can hardly be equated with scientific evidence. Absent some other valid form of evidence, reports of such experiences do not give credence to the belief systems that are constructed out of them.

Perennialism and essentialism are both claims of privileged knowledge about the nature of reality. Perennialism, of whatever type, asserts that some particular dimension or realm or experience is the one true source of all spiritual experience, or goal of all spiritual striving, and that all traditions with differing views are in error to the degree they diverge from this one correct understanding. Essentialism claims to know which property of a phenomenon is more real than all the others. Neither of these claims is demonstrable by means of evidence that are scientifically valid. Perennialist systems are essentialist spiritual visions, not psychological theories; as such, they might be studied for their value in providing inspiring meaning frames for individuals, just as with any other religious system. They should not be advanced as psychological theories.

In contrast to this, Taylor (2017b) seems confident that he has laid out “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)” (p. 111). On this basis, he asserts that “an experiential perennialist (or essentialist) outlook is valid and necessary” (p.). What Taylor has laid out, both here and elsewhere, such as in his reference to Hood’s M-Scale, is not more than preliminary evidence that a particular type of developmental transformation may exist. It is not a valid defense of any perennialist position.

Though Taylor’s studies to date may be imperfect (Hartelius, 2016a), there does appear to be some

preliminary evidence suggesting that a particular type of beneficial psychological transformation, consistent with some accounts of spiritual transformation, may occur outside the context of any spiritual practice or religious belief. If confirmed by further and more careful study, this would be of great importance for transpersonal psychology and for the study of spirituality generally. However, evidence that this type of transformation occurs is not evidence for Taylor’s associated metaphysical speculations.

This question of evidence seems crucial in the dialogue with Taylor, for if criteria for valid evidence cannot be agreed on, then he will continue to claim that he has made an evidence-based case, and I will maintain that he has not. For example, Taylor’s (2017a) assertion that a metaphysical claim could be partly evidence-based was compared with literalist Christian claims that Noah’s flood can be partially supported by geological evidence; also, the assertion by some that the religious idea of intelligent design is scientific was used to illustrate how a lens shaped by preexisting metaphysical beliefs can affect the interpretation of data (Hartelius, 2017a). Taylor (2017b) has objected to these illustrations as false equivalencies or post-truth positions, yet appears to miss the critical point. The issue is not, for example, that “soft perennialism is similar to intelligent design because both are partly evidence-based” (p. 118), but rather, as with intelligent design, *soft perennialism is based on no valid evidence whatsoever*. Nor is the issue that “creationism is based on the willful misinterpretation and fabrication of evidence” (p. 118); rather, as with some creationists, Taylor appears to hold a sincere conviction and then seek confirmatory evidence in ways that lack validity.

As discussed at length elsewhere (Hartelius, 2017b), the use of similarities between different traditions as evidence for perennialism or essentialism is a form of circular reasoning rather than a form of valid evidence. Phenomenological evidence from reports of lived experience is in the same category as evidence from traditions, because traditional accounts are simply formalized and interpreted versions of the same sort of reports. Moreover, evidence for the existence of a particular type of experience or process of development—whether from traditional accounts, qualitative research, or even quantitative studies—is *not evidence for a speculative metaphysical explanation of that phenomenon*.

For example, a Native American myth tells the

story of two tribes, one diligent and one lazy (Clausen, 1954), similar in moral to Aesop's fable of the industrious ant and the dissolute grasshopper. In the end, the Great Spirit gives wings to the hard-working tribe and they become bees who fly from flower to flower sipping nectar; the members of the lazy tribe also receive wings, but are made into flies who have to eat discarded food. Empirical observations can confirm that bees feed from flowers and flies eat garbage, but this does not in any way provide evidence for the veracity of an imaginative explanation of why this is so.

In a parallel way, the evidence that Taylor has advanced for a particular type of experience is not valid evidence for his inspiring but highly speculative soft perennialist explanation of that experience. Even if Taylor's evidence for such experiences were impeccable—even if he were to have flawless cross-cultural phenomenological comparisons—this evidence regarding the existence of a type of experience would not translate into evidence for a soft perennialist explanation; because there is a logical gap between where the evidence applies, and where Taylor wishes it to apply, the evidence itself becomes irrelevant.

By way of analogy, if several pieces of compelling circumstantial evidence have tied a suspect to a murder, but the suspect has a strong alibi—for example, if the chief of police and the mayor and her husband all testified that the suspect was having a beer with them at the time the murder was committed—then the circumstantial evidence would not even be considered, no matter how powerful it might otherwise seem; the ironclad alibi has created a gap between the evidence and its applicability to the (former) suspect. In a similar way, there is no need to consider the specifics of what Taylor has advanced as evidence for soft perennialism, given that the alleged evidence does not apply.

There is an additional logical problem with Taylor's argument that because there are no satisfactory alternate explanations, then his explanation must be correct. This is a fallacy, because it could be that all currently available explanations, including Taylor's, are wrong. It certainly is not necessary, for example, to have a fully adequate neurobiological theory of the experiences Taylor (2017b) has described in order to set aside speculative perennialist explanations. Of course, the opposite is also true: it is possible that what people feel in such experiences is the radiant presence of being itself. The purpose of this extended critique is not to claim that Taylor's vision is wrong, but to point out that as with any

other metaphysical schema, there is no valid evidence to make a determination either way.

Another concern raised by Taylor (2017b) is that I have failed to take into account evidence for perennialism from other contemporary scholars. He specifically mentions Studstill (2005) and Rose (2016) who “have made extremely detailed comparative investigations of contemplative traditions” (Taylor, 2017b, p. 112). As noted, using comparative investigations as evidence for perennialism constitutes circular reasoning; since such similarities are grounds for the premise, they cannot also be used as evidence for the conclusion. Nor is it a responding author's responsibility to address evidence for perennialism that Taylor has not articulated within the dialogue. Nevertheless, I have reviewed Studstill's (2005) mystical pluralism for evidence of perennialism, and shown that he has brought forward no valid evidence (Hartelius, 2017b); however, a comparison of Wilber, Taylor, and Studstill has been fruitful, yielding seven characteristics of a perennialist New Age religion that may be useful for analyses of other such schemas.

Taylor also critiques specific wording relating to my concerns that he may have prematurely dismissed potential neuroscientific explanations for similarities in the category of experiences under study. He has pointed out, correctly, that he rejected neuroscientific factors as explanations, as potentially reductionist (Taylor, 2017b), whereas I defended possible *correlations* with neurological activity. Of course, correlations are generally the basis for explanations, and Taylor (2017a) specifically pointed to “the lack of direct and reliable correspondence between mental and neural activity” (p. 112); this does sound a lot like skepticism that any correlations exist between mind and brain. Taylor has helpfully clarified that he does not rule out the possibility of correlations between neural activity and the experiences he describes, so there may be agreement on that point.

A difference between my stance and Taylor's, relative to neuroscience, seems to be that he has already confidently arrived at an explanation. This position is also evident in his proposal of the term, awakening experiences, which happens to be compatible with his own metaphysical speculations regarding this type of experience (Taylor, 2010): that such transformations are an awakening to a profound truth of the essence of being, of which he has gained a revelation. This is consistent with the exceptional confidence in his account of the actual source of spiritual experience, and in his vision

of how science and psychology and the rules of scholarly evidence must bend to accommodate this truth.

Taylor and the Boundaries of Psychology

Taylor's concern that transpersonal experiences be studied effectively seems quite genuine. Yet retaining scientific rigor will not necessarily preclude meaningful psychological understandings of mystical, spiritual, and other exceptional human experiences that constitute what Maslow (1969) called "the farther reaches of human nature" (p. 1). Taylor (2017b) has warned that if such topics are marginalized as metaphysical and thereby excluded from psychology, this would be contrary to the history and principles of the transpersonal field. Here I stand in full agreement with Taylor, as well as with Maslow (1970), who considered these to be naturalistic phenomena that could be studied empirically. There is no suggestion here that these are metaphysical, nor any attempt to exclude them. To the contrary, there is critique of metaphysical explanations for such events that shortcut the more difficult process of careful and suitably designed scientific inquiry.

Taylor (2017b) has also raised the issue of quantum physics as justification for the use of metaphysical ideas in science. This is a welcome addition to the discussion, since the application of quantum theory to psychology has created considerable muddle. Quantum mechanics rests on a set of equations that predict, with great reliability, the likelihood of various outcomes from events that occur at scales smaller than an atom. All efforts to explain these equations and the events they predict in the language of everyday human experience are necessarily speculative interpretations, including the famed Copenhagen interpretation developed by Bohr and Heisenberg—though there is scarcely any agreement on what this interpretation actually is (Camilleri, 2009), and even Bohr and Heisenberg held significantly different views of the interpretation they had jointly sponsored (Mehra, 1975). The success of this interpretation among a confusion of competing ideas at the Solvay V conference in 1927 may have been due as much to political maneuvering as to any conceptual superiority (Bacciagaluppi & Valentini, 2009). Deep disagreements about interpretations of quantum mechanics continue to the present day (Friere, 2003).

It is worth noting that there has been relatively less dispute about the mathematical equations that

describe quantum events. Furthermore, the physicists who developed quantum mechanics in the early 1900s, and who participated in these debates during its first decades, uniformly thought of quantum events as objective, physical occurrences (Friere, 2003). The controversy arose from efforts to express the observations of quantum mechanics "in common language, suitably refined by the vocabulary of classical physics" (Bohr, 1961, p. 26), a project supported by physicists such as Schrödinger and de Broglie, but resisted by others such as Heisenberg, Born, and Jordan (Jähnert, 2012). The Solvay V conference was convened in 1927, in part, to resolve this issue within the community of physicists, but largely failed in this respect (Bacciagaluppi & Valentini, 2009).

For decades after this conference, the debate about interpretations "was considered by physicists at the time as a philosophical controversy, and thus as a controversy without implications for physics" (Friere, 2003, p. 575); it was not until 1964, when Bell challenged "Von Neumann's proof against the possibility of introducing new variables in quantum theory. ... [This opened] the possibility of including experimental physics in order to reject some theories and preserve others" (p. 577). While quantum physicists have engaged in conversations that involve metaphysical speculation, it is evident that they have also held a clear demarcation between philosophy and science.

The example that Taylor (2017b) has offered concerns a record of Bohr's comments to Heisenberg and Pauli in which he complained about the unwillingness of logical positivists to even have a conversation about metaphysics. Yet one does not find that any of these eminent physicists included overt metaphysical claims in their quantum theories. There is a considerable gap between discussing philosophy and metaphysics as such, and inserting these as assumptions into, for example, a psychological theory. If one were to follow the example of quantum physicists, it would be prudent to separate speculative philosophies of spirituality from explanatory models in psychology.

Also on this topic, Taylor (2017b) charges that I have not acknowledged "the inevitability of holding some kind of interpretative metaphysical position in relation to mystical experiences ... because mystical experiences often bring a powerful sense of revelation, a sense that one has made contact with a deeper level of reality, ... such experiences inevitably give rise to questions about the nature of reality" (p.). He then questions why I have

not declared my own metaphysical assumptions, and notes that my suggestion that perhaps “consciousness in some form penetrates through all physicality” (Hartelius, 2015, p. 26) constitutes a metaphysical claim.

There are several issues here. First, as Taylor (2017b) himself has acknowledged, I have noted that some metaphysical assumptions are unavoidable, even in science. This necessarily applies to the study of mystical experiences as well. But Taylor is speaking of something more here, of the conviction that arrives with a mystical experience, the sense that something previously unknown about reality has been revealed. I have had such experiences as well, and can attest to their power and the questions they raise concerning the nature of reality. A logical positivist would likely dismiss such experiences out of hand; Taylor, conversely, appears to have allowed the convictions inspired by such experiences to supersede rational analysis. Since he has inquired, my approach is to hold both the rational analysis and the mystical encounter as parts of the whole of what it is to be human, to give each its due within its own domain of experience, and to reach for a more inclusive way of understanding that allows for both without violating or diminishing either. This is an aspirational position, since I do not claim to have succeeded.

As for the suggestion that consciousness might penetrate physicality, I entertain this as a possible alternate to the assumption that physicality has no consciousness. The latter is one of the philosophical assumptions that usually accompanies scientific work. It is not controversial to claim that consciousness occurs in human beings, though the term remains difficult to define. What is challenging to explain is how consciousness comes to be present in humans in a world that, according to science, is made of rule-following particles. There are quite a few different theories on this issue in philosophy of mind, but whichever one is chosen will inescapably be metaphysical. Therefore, some notion of rudimentary consciousness as an aspect of matter may be as true as its opposite. Acknowledging this would not change experimental standards or reduce scientific rigor, but would allow some research to proceed rather than be dismissed *a priori*. However, I frankly acknowledge that the notion of consciousness permeating matter as an aspect of what it is, is just as unavoidably metaphysical as the countervailing notion of naïve materialism.

How does this differ from Taylor’s (2016) soft perennialism and his suggested all-pervading spirit-

force? For one thing, some account of consciousness is an accepted fact of psychology, while all-pervading spirit-force is not. For another, consciousness is essential to the description of the mind, while a palpable spirit-force is not. The presence or absence of consciousness in a person is clearly observable: it is present in waking states, dormant in sleep, perhaps immobilized under anesthesia, and departed in death. The presence of an all-pervading spirit-force requires not only a particular type of experience, but a very particular interpretation of that experience, and a carefully customized interpretation of selective reports from multiple traditions. Finally, the study of consciousness is a difficult undertaking that needs to hold its assumptions lightly and its theories tentatively. This differs from Taylor’s study of experiences that allegedly awaken one to the all-pervading spirit-force, a stance that may reflect more confidence than is warranted.

In this regard, it can be noted that Taylor (2017b) has rejected the critique that his soft perennialism is also hierarchical. Because it claims that an all-pervading spirit-force is the source of all spiritual experience, then those traditions with teachings that are more aligned with this description are necessarily more accurate than those that do not (Hartelius, 2017a; note that Ferrer [2017] has expressed a similar, though distinct, critique). Taylor’s (2017b) response is as follows:

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*). (pp. 117-118)

The problem here is that in psychology, as in any other scholarly or scientific discipline, accuracy is valued. If one description is more encumbered with cultural and metaphysical constructs than another, then it will be valued less—and thus a hierarchy is established. The fact that Taylor’s view may differ does not alter this pragmatic reality.

Furthermore, Taylor (2017c) has presented his work as reflecting not only a full evidence-based accounting of the source of spiritual experiences, but as documenting the beginning of a collective evolutionary leap forward into “a bright, new world of wakefulness”

(p. 267). This is one of the hallmarks of New Age religion (Hanegraaf, 2009), an approach also marked by

systems of belief and practice that include holism and interconnectedness, a unified worldview, a universalized spirituality based on appropriation and recontextualization of content from spiritual traditions, an evolutionary perspective, a blurring of psychology and spirituality, a focus on subjective experience, a mystical idea of the inner self, and a belief in the imminent dawning of a new and better era of human existence. (Hartelius, 2017b, p. 132)

Taylor's (2016) soft perennialism checks nearly all of these boxes, and to call it a New Age religion is fitting and reasonable.

What I have suggested is that it is unfortunate for the reading public when scholars such as Taylor advance these sorts of metaphysical visions—in this case a version of New Age spirituality—under the guise of psychology, rather than as the spiritual teachings that they could more properly be considered. In response to this, Taylor (2017b) noted that “the soft perennialist model is not presented in this book, nor in any other of my popular books” (p. 113). This is not entirely accurate. In his most recent book, Taylor (2017c) has presented himself as a psychologist who studies awakening experiences. Thereafter, he referred numerous times to what is in one place termed “high-intensity awakening experiences in which one perceives a radiant spirit-force pervading all things and bringing all things into oneness as manifestations of the force” (p. 155). He also reviewed various religions for evidence that their teachings, if understood and described correctly, align with his view. While he did not use the term, soft perennialism, he has clearly presented its constituent elements, which makes his denial puzzling. This type of popular book, by someone with an advanced degree, does not reconcile science and spirit—it conflates religion with psychology.

Conclusion

The critique of Taylor's soft perennialism, and the opinion that this type of approach is unlikely to constitute the future of transpersonal psychology, is not offered lightly nor offhandedly. It is based on sober assessment after an extended consideration of the transpersonal field. For the past 15 years I have participated in an intensive study of the definition of transpersonal psychology (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin,

2007), its scope (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013), its philosophy (e.g., Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013), its character (Hartelius, 2014a, 2016b), its relationship to evidence (Hartelius, 2014b), and its future (Hartelius, Krippner, & Thouin-Savard, 2017). As part of that process, I have observed the field shift from a significant commitment to Wilber's (e.g., 2000) perennialist model to philosophical contexts that are far less reliant on overt metaphysical claims, a move that positions the field to engage with and influence the field of psychology rather than holding itself separate as a modestly elite spiritual community. Among the students I have encountered in ten years of graduate education, I have seen a shift toward greater interest in empirical data and research. On these bases, it is my considered opinion that perennialist models are more in the field's past than its future, and that further investment of time and effort into such models would be better spent elsewhere.

At the same time, the transpersonal field maintains a somewhat experimental character. The fact that multiple attempts at perennialist models have been made and effectively critiqued helps to remove any residual doubt about perennialism as a possible vehicle for the psychology of spirituality. From my perspective, Taylor's efforts and this dialogue may be constructive in rounding out the consideration of perennialism so the field can move forward toward the construction of a whole person psychology and a whole person neuroscience without wistful backward glances. The field will certainly continue to engage with philosophical questions, the hermeneutical value of metaphysical systems, and theoretical engagement with issues that cross over between psychology and religious studies—and will no doubt also move forward in some unexpected ways—but it is my hope to also see an emerging emphasis on empirical research.

Taylor (2017a) has voiced concern regarding the tenor of my response to his work, in the process quoting from a transpersonal scholar who has made a statement regarding the spiritual values of the field. What Taylor and the cited scholar seem to miss is that if transpersonal psychology is a psychology at all, and not a New Age spiritual community posing as a psychology, then scholarly work deserves to be critiqued in a scholarly manner—that is, without pulling punches on the merit of the thought and methods, and without *ad hominem* attacks on the person. The focus here is not spiritual values, but scholarly values.

With respect to Taylor's (2017b) call for maximal inclusiveness within the transpersonal field, it can be noted that his thought has been generously afforded more journal pages and more thoughtful and detailed response than any other submitting author during my tenure with this journal. I have stepped down from the position of editor on this issue in order to enter this dialogue on level ground, and turned over decisions regarding the publication of this set of papers to others; Taylor has been offered the last word in the current exchange, and a future issue will be opened to contributions by other scholars who wish to participate in what will likely be an ongoing conversation. Inclusivity does not require agreement, and academic journals have a role in upholding standards of scholarship within a given field as well as providing platforms for diversity of perspective. With respect to Taylor's (2016) work, the goal has been to balance inclusiveness with appropriate rigor; others can determine whether this has been achieved.

While I have critiqued his metaphysical schema, his claims of evidence, and his application of research methods, I have also warmly supported and encouraged Taylor's research into the phenomenon he has termed awakening experiences, noting repeatedly the great importance and potential of this subject for transpersonal psychology, as well as for psychology more broadly. Taken together, the critique and the encouragement is offered as guidance on where I believe Taylor could make the greatest contribution.

At the end of this writing I must acknowledge that a number of Taylor's specific points and concerns have not been addressed. For this I offer my apologies, having chosen to focus on those aspects that seemed to me to be most relevant to the conversation, while also attempting to respond to the greater portion of his concerns. It is my sincere hope that with these latest two responses, the substance of the critiques and encouragements I have expressed will fall on fertile ground, and that Taylor will be able in future to contribute enhanced research on his topic. This would be of great benefit to the transpersonal field.

It also seems appropriate to ask why this seemingly arcane topic is worthy of multiple papers. A Western psychology is limited by its culturally located philosophical assumptions. In order to more fully serve diverse individuals and cultures in an increasingly interconnected world, these limited assumptions need to be identified and critiqued effectively. The history of

psychology is littered with challenges to these that failed.

For example, in the early 20th century Gestalt psychology offered a perspective on systems and holism that questioned particle-based views of mind and brain; today, the optical illusions used to illustrate its philosophical challenge appear in psychology textbooks under the topic of perception, stripped of reference to the movement and the conceptual openings it offered. Around the same time, phenomenology developed as a counterpoint to naive assumptions regarding the relationship between observer and observed, assumptions that largely survive within contemporary sciences including psychology; today its most common functions are analysis of consumer opinions about commercial products, and synthesis of peer feedback for corporate leaders, with some use as adjunct enrichment to quantitative data in psychology and sociology. In the mid-20th century humanistic psychology emerged as a champion of basing psychological theory on the present moment of human relationship and experience; today, its place has been claimed by positive psychology, which though a contribution in its own right, is little more than an optimistic version of cognitive approaches that propagate rather than challenge culturally based assumptions. More recently, there is momentum within the study of mindfulness to reframe it as a metacognitive approach rather than a whole person shift in state of being. One by one, approaches that could have shaken the foundations of psychology have been relegated to its margins, as the uncritical imposition of conventional assumptive frames stripped away articulate challenges to those very lenses.

In this context, transpersonal psychology is one of the very few orientations currently capable of mounting the sort of challenge urgently needed as a corrective for contemporary psychology, spanning all the way from philosophy, through theory and constructs, down to empirical evidence. If a transpersonal psychology spends its credibility on the uncritical adoption of perennialist models that can with some justification be framed as "openly religionist" (Hanegraaff, 2009, p. 51), it will forfeit any standing as a scientific field capable of bringing constructive challenge to the broader field of psychology. If a transpersonal psychology does not engage in this crucial work, which other subfield will step up to take it on in its place? Likely, none.

In a postmodern world it is not possible to say that science is a more true knowledge frame than

any other; science is one location among many, with its own strengths, characteristics, and limitations. It is, however, a useful location, and psychology functions within this terrain. Transpersonal critiques of psychology follow along the lines of feminist critiques of science more broadly, and both appear to serve a goal of improving science rather than undercutting it. To offer views that are arguably religious as if they were psychological theories—even psychological theories of spirituality—is to mistake one’s location. Location is a variable that matters. A comedian who earns large fees by ridiculing and insulting others on stage would not be well served to maintain this behavior in front of a judge or magistrate; similarly, the sort of legalistic hairsplitting that may win the day in a court of law is unlikely to help achieve resolution in quarrels with a domestic partner. Religious views are not wrong, nor are they objectively lesser than scientific ones; they are simply not suited for the domain of scientific work. Taylor’s work, as Wilber’s before him, likely belongs in the domain of inspiring popular spirituality or philosophy; not even a transpersonal approach should accept it as psychological theory.

References

- Bacciagaluppi, G., & Valentini, A. (2009). *Quantum theory at the crossroads: Reconsidering the 1927 Solvay conference*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139194983>
- Blackstone, J. (2006). Intersubjectivity and nonduality in the psychotherapeutic relationship. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 38*(1), 25–40.
- Bohr, N. (1961, October). The Solvay meetings and the development of quantum physics. In R. Stoops (Ed.), *La theorie quantique des champs*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Camilleri, K. (2009). Constructing the myth of the Copenhagen interpretation. *Perspectives on Science, 17*(1), 26–57. <https://doi.org/10.1162/posc.2009.17.1.26>
- Clausen, L. W. (1954). *Insect fact and folklore*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Ferrer, J. N. (2017). *Participation and the mystery: Transpersonal essays in psychology, education, and religion*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Friedman, H. L. (2002). Transpersonal psychology as a scientific field. *International Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 21*(1), 175–187.
- Friedman, H. L. (2015). Further developing transpersonal psychology as a science: Building and testing middle-range transpersonal theories. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 34*(1–2), 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2015.34.1-2.55>
- Friedman, H. L., & Hartelius, G. (Eds.). (2013). *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of transpersonal psychology*. Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118591277>
- Friere, O., Jr. (2003). A story without an ending: The quantum physics controversy 1950–1970. *Science & Education, 12*(5–6), 573–586. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025317927440>
- Hartelius, G. (2014a). The imperative for diversity in a transpersonal psychology of the whole person (Editor’s introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 33*(2), iii–iv.
- Hartelius, G. (2014b). What constitutes evidence in an evidence-based psychology of the whole person (Editor’s introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 33*(2), iii–iv.
- 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. (2016a). Taylor’s soft perennialism: A primer of perennial flaws in transpersonal scholarship. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 35*(2), 42–47. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2016.35.2.42>
- Hartelius, G. (2016b). Transpersonal is a whole person psychology (Editor’s introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 35*(2), iii–iv. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2016.35.2.iii>
- Hartelius, G. (2017a). Zombie perennialism: An intelligent design for psychology? A further response to Taylor’s soft perennialism. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 36*(2), 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.93>
- Hartelius, G. (2017b). Circular reasoning is not the uroboros: Rejecting perennialism as a psychological theory. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 36*(2), 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.121>
- Hartelius, G., Caplan, M., & Rardin, M.-A. (2007). Transpersonal psychology: Defining the past, divining the future. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 35*(2), 135–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873260701274017>

- 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: Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118591277.ch10>
- Hartelius, G., Krippner, S., & Thouin-Savard, M. I. (2017). Transpersonal and psychology: An experiment in inclusivity and rigor (Editor's introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36(1), iii–iv. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.1.iii>
- Jähnert, M. (2012). Revisiting the 1927 Solvay conference and the early interpretation of quantum mechanics. *Metascience*, 21, 125–129. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11016-011-9555-z>
- Maslow, A. H. (1969). The farther reaches of human nature. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1(1), 1–9.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Religions, values, and peak experiences* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Viking.
- Mehra, J. (1975). *The Solvay conferences on physics*. Boston, MA: D. Reidel. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-1867-8>
- Rose, K. (2016). *Yoga, meditation, and mysticism: Contemplative universals and meditative landmarks*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Studstill, R. (2005). *The unity of mystical traditions: The transformation of consciousness in Tibetan and German mysticism*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Taylor, S. (2005). The sources of higher states of consciousness. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 24(1), 48–60.
- Taylor, S. (2010). *Waking from sleep: Why awakening experiences occur and how to make them permanent*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
- Taylor, S. (2012). Spontaneous awakening experiences: Beyond religion and spiritual practice. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 44(1), 73–91.
- 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(2), 75–92 (this issue). <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.75>
- Taylor, S. (2017b). Keeping the account open: Metaphysical mistrust and ideology in transpersonal psychology (A response to Hartelius, 2017). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36(2), 111–120. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.111>
- Taylor, S. (2017c). *The leap: The psychology of spiritual awakening*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Wilber, K. (2000). *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.

About the Author

Glenn Hartelius, PhD, is Founding Chair of the online PhD program in Integral and Transpersonal Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, CA, where he is Associate Professor. He serves as main editor for the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, coeditor of *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology*, and Secretary of the International Transpersonal Association. His research on the definition and scope of transpersonal psychology has helped to define the field. His work in attention and somatic phenomenology strives to make states of consciousness measurable. He also maintains an executive coaching practice.

About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floragrades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at www.transpersonalstudies.org, and in print through www.lulu.com (search for IJTS).