

9-1-2017

## Moving Beyond Materialism: Can Transpersonal Psychology Contribute to Cultural Transformation?

Steve Taylor

*Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK*

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

Taylor, S. (2017). Moving beyond materialism: Can transpersonal psychology contribute to cultural transformation?. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.147>



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 International Journal of Transpersonal Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Transpersonal Studies by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact the editors.

# Moving Beyond Materialism: Can Transpersonal Psychology Contribute to Cultural Transformation?

*Steve Taylor*

Leeds Beckett University  
Leeds, UK

The issue of whether it is possible to separate science and metaphysics is discussed, with reference to William James and the writings of quantum physicists. The metaphysical framework of scientific materialism is analysed and some of its key assumptions are identified. It is suggested that these assumptions are becoming increasingly untenable, as is evident by the advocacy of post-materialist science by some contemporary scientists. The main appeal of transpersonal psychology to students and practitioners is arguably its lack of allegiance to a materialist metaphysics. Rather than allying itself to the metaphysical paradigm of naturalistic science or attempting to bracket out metaphysics, transpersonal psychology should operate openly within the framework of *post-materialistic* science. Rather than distancing itself from areas such as near-death studies and parapsychology, it should embrace and cooperate with them, sharing the same post-materialist perspective. Transpersonal psychology should not attempt to reduce itself to fit into mainstream psychology but to try expand mainstream psychology to include its concerns and principles. In a laudable attempt to pursue a more scientific approach, some transpersonal theorists have arguably swung too extremely away from essentialism/perennialism and metaphysics. It is hoped that a more balanced approach may be found, incorporating more nuanced and phenomenological forms of perennialism, and more cautious metaphysical claims.

**Keywords:** *Metaphysics, materialism, post-materialism, science, evidence*

In concluding this dialogue, I would like to extend its range. In addition to addressing some of the specific points Hartelius has made, I would like to look at some of the wider implications of the issues that have been discussed. I will look at the issue of metaphysics from a cultural perspective, and also address questions about the role of transpersonal psychology, and its future. I will also discuss questions regarding the scientific status of transpersonal psychology, and its relationship to mainstream psychology.

Hartelius (2017c) has made some helpful comments about how the field of transpersonal psychology can influence mainstream psychology. I will follow his lead with some suggestions of my own, extending the debate beyond the field of psychology to discuss the possible cultural influences of transpersonal psychology. I will argue that the materialist metaphysical model that has dominated secular culture since the end of the nineteenth century has had profoundly detrimental psychological, cultural, and environmental consequences. There is an argument that, in order

to flourish, Western culture has to adopt alternative metaphysical perspectives. A significant development in this regard is the “post-materialist science” movement which challenges the fundamental assumptions of materialism. In my experience (which may not be representative, of course), the primary appeal of transpersonal psychology for students and practitioners is that it points toward “post-materialist” metaphysical perspectives. Whereas mainstream psychology tends to ally itself to materialism, transpersonal psychology has traditionally suggested alternative views of reality. Rather than attempting to appear metaphysically neutral or to bracket out metaphysics—or even adopting the principles of scientific naturalism (Ferrer, 2014)—transpersonal psychology should actively reject materialism and openly adopt post-materialist perspectives, allowing them to inform its approach. In doing so, the field could make a real contribution to the process of cultural change.

My argument is admittedly speculative and provocative, and I am partly making it in the hope that it will stimulate further discussion.

### The Metaphysics of Science

A central theme of Hartelius's (2017c) arguments throughout this dialogue has been his view that metaphysics is an unwelcome intruder into science, and that it is best to attempt to separate the two areas. Hartelius has argued that "the incorporation of religious and metaphysical claims is not the province of any psychology, transpersonal or otherwise" (p. 137). In his latest response, he has suggested that those—including me—who make such claims should be seen as spiritual teachers and "warmly appreciated and encouraged to continue their important work outside of the context of psychology" (p. 137).

William James originally held a similar view. When he began *The Principles of Psychology*, James believed that psychology should be purely a natural science. He argued that psychologists should investigate the correlations between the mind and the brain without pondering over their implications, which would be trespassing into metaphysics. He advocated a "descriptive psychology" that examined correlations without investigating *how* they arose or what they implied (Lambeth, 1999).

Soon afterwards, however, James revised his views. He came to believe (and continued to believe for the rest of his life) that it was futile and intellectually dishonest to artificially separate natural science and metaphysics (Lambeth, 1999; Kelly, 2007). According to James a naturalistic "descriptive" psychology was ungrounded and unstable, not "a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground" but "just the reverse ... a psychology particularly fragile, into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint" (James, 1892, pp. 467–468). As James stated in his presidential address to the American Psychological Society in 1894, "no conventional restrictions can keep metaphysical and so-called epistemological inquiries out of the psychology books" (James, 1895/1978, p. 88). James came to believe that psychology *has to be* grounded in some metaphysical assumptions and that its investigations could, moreover, make an important contribution to metaphysics by helping to establish the nature of the mind-body relationship (Kelly, 2007). (According to Lambeth [1999] this shift in James's approach coincided with his rejection of mind/body dualism and his movement towards a monistic metaphysics which saw mind and body as different aspects of a more fundamental quality.)

In a similar fashion, I have argued that even if psychologists (or scientists in general) do not overtly address metaphysical issues, they are always in the background, informing one's perspective and approach. Ferrer (2014) has made the same point while critiquing the belief of some transpersonal theorists that the field should adopt an approach reminiscent of scientific naturalism. As Kelly (2007) has stated while summarizing James's position, "The real issue, in short, is not whether we will have metaphysics [in psychology], but whether we will have good metaphysics, or bad" (p. 632). In my view, bad metaphysics is when metaphysical claims are abstract and speculative and ungrounded in empirical research. Good metaphysics is when metaphysical claims are inferred or implied by empirical evidence, and are carefully developed and cautiously stated. It might be said that bad metaphysics is also when a metaphysical framework is unacknowledged or hidden, as opposed to when it is overtly and explicitly stated.

Hartelius (2015) has acknowledged that science inevitably includes some metaphysical assumptions. He has also acknowledged that his statement that "consciousness in some form penetrates through all physicality" (p. 26) is "just as unavoidably metaphysical as the countervailing notion of naïve materialism" (Hartelius, 2017c, p. 142).<sup>1</sup> But where do these assumptions end? Where is the cut-off point that separates a "scientific" field with just a few metaphysical assumptions from a religious or "New Age" field with a lot of metaphysical assumptions? I agree that this may not be an "all or nothing" position—at least in the sense that one should try to exclude "bad" metaphysics. It might be possible to exclude speculative discussions about chakras, auras, and astral bodies—or abstract conceptual systems—from transpersonal psychology. Nevertheless, some form of metaphysical paradigm will always be in the background, informing one's attitude and approach with assumptions (often unconscious and unacknowledged) about the nature of reality.

In response to my account of early quantum physicists who had a positive attitude to metaphysics, Hartelius (2017c) has insisted that these physicists kept their metaphysical musings out of their science. As he has written, "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" (p. 137). However, if

one looks at some of the actual writings of such quantum physicists, this assertion seems doubtful. In many of their books, these physicists freely mingled science and metaphysics, describing some of their findings and discussing what they implied about the nature of reality, or of human consciousness, without making any demarcation. For example, in books such as *Physics and Philosophy* (1942/2009) and *The Mysterious Universe* (1937), the British physicist James Jeans explicitly and thoroughly examined the metaphysical implications of modern physics. He stated that he was examining “that borderland territory between physics and philosophy” which “suddenly became so interesting and important through recent developments of theoretical physics ... [with] questions which touch human life very closely, such as materialism and free-will” (Jeans, 1942/2009, p. 1). In *The Mysterious Universe* (1937) Jeans made the well-known statement that, “The universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine. Mind no longer appears as an accidental intruder into the realm of matter” (p. 137). Max Planck (1931) took a similar approach in *The Universe in the Light of Modern Physics*, describing how modern physics implied “realities existing apart from our sense-perceptions, and that there are problems and conflicts where these realities are of greater value for us than the richest treasures of the world of experience” (p. 107). Werner Heisenberg (1958) took a similar approach in *The Physicists’ Conception of Nature*, as did Erwin Schrodinger, Albert Einstein, and Wolfgang Pauli in various books. The idea that these physicists ceased to be scientists because they addressed metaphysical issues—as Hartelius (2017c) has suggested should be the case with me, since I have published a book with the subtitle *The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening* (Taylor, 2017c) which incorporates perennialist metaphysical claims—seems bizarre.

This shows how difficult it is separate science and metaphysics. As William James concluded, it is impossible to try to bracket out metaphysical claims or to keep science and metaphysics in different compartments. In reality, there is no boundary and they continually merge into one another. As suggested in Taylor (2017b), many contemporary scientists also routinely make claims about the nature of mind or of reality itself, usually within a materialist metaphysical framework that sees human being as genetic machines, consciousness as a by-product of brain activity, and human life as essentially purposeless and meaningless.

## Moving Beyond Materialism

### The Metaphysics of Materialism

As noted above, William James believed that Psychology could make a significant contribution to metaphysics, and I believe this is also the case with transpersonal psychology at the present time. Succinctly put, transpersonal psychology may be able to contribute to a cultural movement beyond the metaphysical framework of scientific materialism and towards a new “post-materialist” metaphysics, as exemplified by the contemporary “post-materialist science” movement. (Beauregard et al., 2014). To develop my argument, it will be necessary to briefly examine the metaphysical framework of materialism in more detail and to highlight some of its cultural effects. (Incidentally, let me make it clear that the following section should not be taken as a direct critique of Hartelius’s approach. I am not suggesting that he advocates the naive materialist position which will be described here.)

Materialism is a form of monism suggesting that matter is the primary reality of the universe, and that most significant phenomena can be explained in terms of (or as epiphenomena of) the interactions of material particles. There were some ancient philosophers who put forward materialist views, particularly in ancient Greece and Rome. (For example, the poetical tract *The Nature of Things* by the Roman poet Lucretius [2007] described the universe as a giant machine and explained mental and physical phenomena in terms of tiny elementary particles.) Similarly, some scientists began to adopt a materialist metaphysics as early as the 17th century (Ferrer, 2014), but materialism arguably only started to become a *prevalent* metaphysical paradigm in Western culture towards the end of the 19th century. With the decline of religion there was a widespread realization amongst intellectuals that the findings of science could be adapted to provide a new conceptual framework to make sense of the world. One fervent Victorian materialist was T. H. Huxley (1874), who described human beings as “conscious automata” (p. 577) with no free will. Another prominent scientist of the time, Henry Maudsley (1879), stated that “mind is an outcome and function of matter in a certain state of organization” (p. 667).

An early expression of the materialist worldview in psychology was behaviorism which suggested that all human behaviour was simply the result of environmental influences, and that mental phenomena and consciousness itself could be disregarded, since

they could not be observed. Later developments such as cognitive psychology and biopsychology were also underpinned with materialist assumptions. In philosophy, a similar expression was the field of logical positivism which held that only things that could be observed and verified by the senses were meaningful, and that metaphysical statements could be disregarded because they could not be verified. The discovery of genes offered a way of explaining human development and behavior in terms of microcosmic elements and led to a new interpretation of evolution (known as Neo-Darwinism) which in turn led to the field of evolutionary psychology. At the same time, the medical advances of the twentieth century were amazingly successful, lending support to the notion of the human body as essentially a very complex machine that can be fixed when it malfunctions. The fields of neurology and neuroscience—facilitated by brain-imaging technologies—applied to this model to the brain, which was also seen as very complex machine whose interactions could account for human experience and behavior. All of these developments seemed to suggest that the materialist-reductionist enterprise of paring things down to their essential elements was valid. As a result, materialism took hold as a dominant explanatory paradigm.

Modern day scientific materialism includes a number of assumptions—for example, that mental phenomena and consciousness itself are the product of neurological activity; that human beings and other living beings are biochemical machines who exist in ontological separation to one another, and who consist of genes whose purpose is to survive and replicate; that the origins and the evolution of life can be explained in terms of accidental factors; that consciousness or personal identity cannot continue following the death of the body and brain; that human behavior and experience are determined by genetic and neurological factors; that the world and the universe are fundamentally mechanistic and inert; that paranormal phenomena cannot exist because they contravene the laws of nature, and so on (Kelly et al., 2007; Nagel, 2012; Sheldrake, 2012; Beauregard et al., 2014).

Rather than being scientific facts, these tenets of materialism are more accurately seen as metaphysical extrapolations based on some scientific findings. This is not science as such, but scientism, which is a quasi-religion (Platinga, 2011; Sheldrake, 2012; Beauregard

et al., 2014). For example, it is a fact that correlations exist between consciousness and brain activity, but an assumption that brain activity produces consciousness. It is a fact that evolution has taken place, but an assumption that it can be explained in terms of purely accidental factors. It is a fact that atoms and molecules exist, but an assumption that life can be explained in purely physicalist terms.

There have undoubtedly been some positive effects of materialism. Perhaps the rejection of the idea of an afterlife has led to increased affirmation and acceptance of this life. In a similar way, perhaps—as Nietzsche (2005) believed—rejecting the concept of God has liberated human beings and provided an opportunity for self-development. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1998) has portrayed the positive side of materialism in a similar way. Despite the apparent bleakness of his mechanistic worldview, he has suggested that meaning emerges from simple fact of being alive in the world: “After sleeping through a hundred million centuries we have finally opened our eyes on a sumptuous planet, sparkling with colour, bountiful with life” (p. 8).

Nonetheless, the metaphysical paradigm of materialism has arguably had highly detrimental effects. Philosophical materialism has arguably led to *consumerist* materialism—a pervading hedonism and individualism, stemming from a feeling that if this world is all there is, and human beings are just genetic machines, they may as well just enjoy themselves as much as possible and take as much from the world as they can, without worrying about the consequences (Kastrup, 2014). In biomedical terms, materialism has helped to establish a mechanistic model of the human organism in which even psychological conditions are treated as physical disorders that can be “fixed” through pharmacological interventions, despite limited and questionable evidence for the efficacy of widely prescribed psychiatric drugs such as serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs; Kelly et al., 2007; Healy, 2015). In environmental terms, it could also be argued that materialism has encouraged and sanctioned an attitude of domineering recklessness to the natural world in which natural phenomena (which are after all no more than chemical machines) only have a utilitarian value. If nature is insentient and exists in otherness to human beings, then it becomes little more than a supply of resources (Taylor, in press).

### Post-Materialism

Materialists tend to see themselves as in opposition to traditional religion, with materialism as the only viable alternative to a prerational mythic and superstitious worldview (Nagel, 2012). However, there are certainly other possibilities. A significant recent development in science has been the “post-materialist science” movement, founded by a group of scientists including Mario Beauregard, Lisa Miller, and Gary Schwartz (Beauregard et al., 2014). The aim of this movement is to highlight the metaphysical assumptions that underpin materialist science (as described above), and to suggest that these are no longer viable, as they cannot explain or account for many aspects of human experience and multiple phenomena which appear “anomalous” from the standpoint of materialism.

The post-materialist science movement has its own explicit metaphysical assumptions which are deemed to accord more closely with scientific evidence and offer a more complete and cohesive explanation of reality than the materialist model. One of these assumptions is that “Mind represents an aspect of reality as primordial as the physical world. Mind is fundamental in the universe, i.e., it cannot be derived from matter and reduced to anything more basic” (Beauregard et al., 2014, p. 273). Other key assumptions are that “There is a deep interconnectedness between mind and the physical world” and that “Minds are apparently unbounded and may unite in ways suggesting a unitary One Mind that includes all individual single minds” (p. 273).

According to the post-materialist science movement, in recent decades the metaphysical paradigm of materialist science has become increasingly untenable. A number of new scientific fields and an increasing number of general scientific findings have begun to cast doubt on many of its assumptions. As early as the 1990s, Dupré (1993) described how materialist reductionism as a strategy had met with widespread failure throughout the fields of biology, genetics, ecology, and psychology. While as Ferrer (2014) has summarized, “Important contemporary trends in complexity theory, nonlinear science, and neuroscience not only postulate diverse forms of downward causation but also challenge the epistemic superiority of reductionist explanations” (p. 155).

To take one specific example, the mapping of the human genome—the so-called Genome Project, the first draft of which was completed in 2000—discovered

that human beings have far fewer genes than expected, many of which are shared by other life forms. This makes it difficult to explain the physical, neurological, and behavioral complexity of human beings—and the full range of differences between species—in genetic terms (Sheldrake, 2012). The project was originally predicted to bring about a revolution in healthcare, showing how common diseases were caused by the inheritance of faulty genes, but it was found that faulty genes have very little role in predisposing human beings to disease (Hall, 2010; Sheldrake, 2012). The project also cast doubt on the simplistic image of genes—put forward by Dawkins (1976), for example—as self-contained, discrete pieces of DNA with specific roles. The reality was found to be much more complex than this, showing that most genes cooperate and multitask. Single genes can code for several different proteins and may have other roles too. As a result, the genome project spelled the end of the popular belief that there are “genes for” certain traits and characteristics (Hall, 2010; Sheldrake, 2012).

In a more general way, the confidence of neurological materialists has been dented by the lack of any progress in attempts to explain consciousness in neurological terms, as it looks increasingly unlikely that there is any direct causal link between brain activity and consciousness. As a result, panpsychist explanations of consciousness have begun to seem more viable. As the neuroscientist Cristof Koch (2014)—originally a materialist who worked with Francis Crick for many years to try to establish the neural correlates of consciousness—has written:

Emergence of subjective feelings from physical stuff appears inconceivable.... The phenomenal hails from a kingdom other than the physical and is subject to different laws. I see no way for the divide between unconscious and conscious states to be bridged by bigger brains or more complex neurons. (p. 28)

As a result, Koch has adopted the panpsychist view that consciousness is an inherent feature of the universe. A diverse range of other findings from areas such as neuroplasticity, placebo studies, psi experiments, studies of near-death experiences, and modern physics have added weight to the view that, rather than being simply produced by brain activity, mind is nonmaterial and fundamental to the universe (Kelly et al., 2007; Kelly, Crabtree, & Marshall, 2015; Taylor, in press). As Kelly (2007) has summarized, “The body conceived

conventionally as a physiological machine has proven unable to count for all the properties of minds, and so we must find a different theory that can better account for the empirical data” (p. 630).

As a final example, the relatively new field of quantum biology has shown that strange quantum effects do not just occur inside atoms; they permeate the macrocosmic world. Phenomena such as photosynthesis, the navigation of some birds via the Earth’s magnetic field, and the movement of protons inside molecules, appear to involve quantum process such as entanglement, non-locality, and “quantum tunneling” (Ball, 2011; Al-Khalili & McFadden, 2014). This implies that it is no longer possible to separate the quantum world from the macrocosmic everyday world, pretending that it has no significance. Materialists can no longer simply base their worldview on the principles of Newtonian physics, while ignoring the implications of quantum physics. As is clear from the discussion of early quantum physicists above, these findings strongly imply post-materialist metaphysical perspectives—and at the very least, strongly undermine the assumptions of materialism (Kelly et al., 2007; Taylor, in press).

Arguably, unlike most other psychological approaches, transpersonal psychology is traditionally allied to *post*-materialist science. Due to its traditional allegiance to Eastern spiritual traditions (which of course offer alternative metaphysical perspectives), and its investigations into the farther reaches of human nature and anomalous phenomena, transpersonal psychology has traditionally included (and sanctioned) post-materialist metaphysical perspectives. In fact, for better or worse, the field has traditionally attracted individuals who are disenchanted with the materialist metaphysical paradigm and are keen to investigate alternative models of reality. Certainly, in my own experience of teaching transpersonal psychology courses at my university and attending transpersonal psychology conferences, this has appeared to be the primary appeal of the field.

Rather than attempting to adopt the metaphysical paradigm of naturalistic science—as Ferrer (2014) has suggested of transpersonal psychologists such as Friedman and MacDonald—and rather than attempting to be metaphysically neutral or to bracket out metaphysics, it would surely be more advisable for transpersonal psychology to accept its natural allegiance to post-materialistic science, to adopt its metaphysical perspective, and to allow it to inform its approach. It

could be argued that, in recent years, there has been a tendency for some transpersonal psychologists to look in the wrong direction—towards materialism, rather than post-materialism.

It is important to point out that this does not just mean adhering to one particular metaphysical position. There are many forms of post-materialist metaphysics, including panpsychism (which itself includes many different varieties, such as panexperientialism and panprotopsyism), idealism, panentheism, dual-aspect monism, and non-Cartesian dualist-interactionist models. So, adopting a general post-materialist metaphysical outlook does not necessarily entail ceasing to be pluralistic. Nevertheless, these approaches share commonalities—most fundamentally, their rejection of the materialist view that matter is the primary reality of the universe and that mental phenomena are reducible to materialist causes. In contrast, these approaches infer that mind (or consciousness) is at least *as* fundamental as matter, and is possibly even (according to some approaches) a fundamental universal quality that precedes matter. As well as positing a different relationship between mind and brain, these approaches allow for a more complex understanding of phenomena such as evolution, death (including the possibility of an afterlife), spiritual experiences, and psychic phenomena (Kelly et al., 2007; Nagel, 2012, Kelly et al., 2015; Taylor, in press).

Since perennialism has been a major topic of this debate, it is important to consider its relationship with post-materialist perspectives. Soft perennialism (or essentialism) can be seen as a post-materialist interpretation of spiritual experiences and traditions, as opposed (for example) to a materialist interpretation which sees spiritual experiences as simple products of neurological activity. Soft perennialism is an interpretation which is inferred from—and supported by—post-materialistic perspectives that view mind or consciousness as a fundamental and/or universal quality. Arguably, panpsychism does not support the soft perennialist model, since it does not posit a universal non-material quality or essence, but only that all matter has a mental aspect to it, and therefore a certain degree of sentience. However, post-materialist perspectives such as idealism and dual-aspect monism do allow for the claims of soft perennialism, since they do posit a fundamental or universal non-material quality.

Soft perennialism posits an immanent and all-pervading spiritual force or essence which is conceptualized

in different ways by different spiritual traditions. In contemplative or mystical traditions associated with monotheistic religions, it is conceptualized in theistic terms, while in other traditions it is conceptualized in terms of fundamental spiritual principles such as brahman, tao, or dharmakaya. It is also conceived in various (but similar) ways by many indigenous cultures. This spiritual force is the essence of everything that exists, so that there is a fundamental interconnectedness between all things. It is also the essence of one's own being—as is sometimes directly sensed in experiences of “pure consciousness” — so that human beings are fundamentally interconnected with (and even actually *one* with) all things, including all other human beings (Taylor, 2016). These claims accord very well with the post-materialist scientific claims that “mind is fundamental in the universe,” that “there is a deep interconnectedness between mind and the physical world,” and that “minds are apparently unbounded and may unite in ways suggesting a unitary, One Mind that includes all individual, single minds” (Beauregard et al., 2014, p. 273).

It is also worth remembering that it is impossible to avoid metaphysics. Transpersonal psychology cannot help but be grounded in, or allied with, *some* form of metaphysical paradigm—and it is surely preferable for the field to ally itself to post-materialist scientific perspectives rather than to some form of materialism.

### The Contribution of Transpersonal Psychology

Hartelius (2017c) has argued that rather than separating itself as an “elite spiritual community” transpersonal psychology should “engage with and influence the field of psychology” (p. 143). He has also suggested a number of ways in which transpersonal psychology can influence the mainstream. I agree with this approach and his assertion that 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” (p. 144). But unlike Hartelius, I believe that, most fundamentally, transpersonal psychology should challenge and influence mainstream psychology by *committing itself to a post-materialist metaphysical approach and encouraging mainstream psychology to move beyond its present materialist metaphysics, towards post-materialist perspectives.*

This is a valuable contribution that transpersonal psychology can make—not just to the field of psychology, but to the whole of science and by extension, to the whole

of Western culture. (Of course, there is no reason why transpersonal psychology *should* necessarily have any cultural role or any social responsibility, but this is an approach it *could* take.) One could make a comparison to studies of near-death experiences or of paranormal phenomena. These areas are fiercely debated precisely because they threaten the basic assumptions of the materialist metaphysical model. Thus, adherents to materialism often go to great lengths to try to explain away the apparent positive findings of psi experiments or to explain near-death experiences in neurological or physiological terms (Kelly et al., 2007; Carter, 2010; Sartori, 2014; Taylor, in press). This is because these phenomena are, one might say, potential metaphysical “game-changers.” That is, if they were proven to be real, they would undermine the materialist metaphysical model. For example, if near-death experiences cannot be explained in neurological or physiological terms, then they strongly imply that consciousness can occur independently of the brain, and so is not directly produced by brain activity. If telepathy is real, there is an implication that one's own thoughts do not simply exist within one's own private mental space, as a product of neurological activity, but that mind is somehow shared collectively, as something more fundamental than the brain, or matter in general. (On the other hand, if it could be categorically shown that these phenomena can be wholly explained in materialistic terms, then this would confirm the materialist model.) As a result, research in these areas is immensely valuable.

One can make a similar claim for research in transpersonal psychology. In my view, the investigation of higher states of consciousness or spiritual (or awakening) experiences, of the effects of psychospiritual transformative practices or substances (such as meditation, mindfulness, or psychedelics) and ongoing states of personal or spiritual transformation, is as significant as the investigation of NDEs or psi experiences. Similarly to their approach to NDEs and psychic phenomena, adherents to materialism tend to explain spiritual experiences in terms of abnormal or aberrational neurological activity. As Mahner (2012) has stated, modern science has excluded “supernatural” phenomena as a metaphysical supposition. Like NDEs, spiritual experiences are often interpreted as hallucinations or delusions (Aaen-Stockdale, 2012).

Another characteristic of materialism is a naïve faith in the objectivity and reliability of ordinary

awareness. There is an assumption that, in an ordinary state of awareness, the world is seen in a reliable and objective way, and that nonordinary (or altered) states of awareness can only be inauthentic, and the worldview they present can only be illusory. In other words, there is an assumption of the *hegemony* of ordinary awareness—the assumption that ordinary awareness is superior to any other form of awareness.

In a similar way to studies of NDEs and psychic phenomena, therefore, transpersonal psychology could challenge the hegemony of ordinary awareness and play an essential role in establishing the authenticity of expansive states of being. It could suggest the existence of wider realms of experience than those conceived of by materialism, pointing to what Ferrer (2014) has described as “the plausibility of a deep and ample multidimensional cosmos in which the sensible world (as narrowly conceived by modern naturalism) does not exhaust the possibilities of the Real” (p. 170).<sup>2</sup>

Even more importantly, by analyzing the transformative effects of psychospiritual practices—and instances of spontaneous transformation—transpersonal psychology may help to make expansive states of being more culturally acceptable and more accessible. In this way, transpersonal psychology can contribute to a shift towards post-materialist perspectives. Most NDE researchers, parapsychologists, and psi researchers do not refrain from stating the metaphysical implications of their research (for example, Van Lommel, 2006; Sartori, 2014; Radin, 2009; Sheldrake, 2012), and there is no reason why transpersonal psychologists should do so either. For transpersonal psychology, this would also mean *embracing* such fields as parapsychology and near-death studies as natural bedfellows, rather than excluding them on the grounds that a scientific field should have no dealings with supernatural or transcendent experiences (Friedman, 2013).

In fact, it could be argued that transpersonal psychology has traditionally taken this approach, and this is what has traditionally differentiated it from more mainstream psychological approaches. Within psychology, and Western culture as a whole, transpersonal psychology has traditionally offered and explored post-materialist perspectives, including essentialism or perennialism (Ferrer, 2002). There is therefore a danger that, if transpersonal psychology attempts to bracket out metaphysics, or even allies itself to the materialist metaphysical paradigm (Ferrer, 2014),

then it would lose this essential role. It would cease to be distinguishable from other psychological approaches—such as positive psychology or anomalistic psychology—and possibly be subsumed by them, and therefore cease to exist. Also, significantly for the longstanding viability of the field, this may mean losing its traditional appeal to students and practitioners. (In a more general sense, this is a potential issue with the recommendation by transpersonal theorists, such as Friedman [2013] and MacDonald [2013], that transpersonal psychology should be a naturalistic science, excluding metaphysical and supernatural concerns, together with supposedly nonscientific approaches such as hermeneutics or contemplative methodologies. At a certain point, there is a sense that the “trans” is being removed from the “transpersonal.”) Rather than attempting to change itself so that it can become integrated into mainstream psychology, transpersonal psychology should rather continue its efforts to change mainstream psychology. Rather than reducing itself to try to fit into the mainstream, transpersonal psychology should try to *broaden* the mainstream.

### Common Ground

At this point, there is some common ground with Hartelius. Like him, I believe that the best way that transpersonal psychology can influence mainstream psychology and contribute to cultural change is by taking a more empirical, research-based approach and by becoming less oriented around Eastern wisdom traditions. Hartelius (2017c) has mentioned that in recent years among his students there has been “a shift toward greater interest in empirical data and research” (p. 143). This is a very positive development, and I am pleased to say that in the UK we have made similar progress in our transpersonal psychology-based degree courses, both at my university (Leeds Beckett University) and elsewhere. More and more students are choosing transpersonal topics for their dissertations and pursuing these with scientific rigor.

Transpersonal psychology has traditionally been too speculative, conceptual, and theoretical. It is not enough to simply formulate theories or models and try to justify them in terms of previous research, in terms of the internal coherence and seeming validity of the theory itself, or in relation to other theories. It is important to test concepts and theories, and not to just leave them hanging in abstract space. This was a weakness of

Wilber's model—rather than being firmly grounded in research, it was largely an *abstract* metaphysical system, and therefore an example of “bad metaphysics,” in terms of Kelly's (2007) distinction. As a result, I have been keen to encourage and contribute to research projects, and to refine and improve my approach to research on an ongoing basis. I believe that transpersonal psychology can benefit from a whole range of different approaches to research, from contemplative methodologies to quantitative and psychometric approaches.

At the same time, whilst the wisdom traditions are a great source of insight and guidance, it is essential for transpersonal psychology to study experiences that occur outside their contexts. As suggested in Taylor (2016), awakening experiences (or ongoing states of wakefulness) may be interpreted within the context of particular spiritual traditions, but they frequently occur to individuals who have no background in or knowledge of the traditions. According to the soft perennialist model, spiritual and mystical experiences are glimpses of expansive potential ranges of human experience that are more fundamental than any particular tradition.

However, the main point of divergence with Hartelius is that I do not believe that in order to proceed in a more empirical, research-based direction transpersonal psychology necessarily has to abandon a perennial perspective, or eschew or attempt to bracket out metaphysics. (Indeed, as suggested above, this would possibly have a seriously deleterious effect.) Hartelius (2017c) has claimed that “*soft perennialism is based on no valid evidence whatsoever*” (p. 139, italics in original). However, I would suggest that, as with his definitions of science and metaphysics, Hartelius's definition of evidence is too narrow and is derived from the metaphysical suppositions of scientific materialism.

The evidence for soft perennialism—or essentialism—presented in Taylor (2017a) includes the various studies using Hood's scale (suggesting a common core of characteristics of mystical experiences across and outside spiritual traditions); the examinations of cross-traditional spiritual texts and reports of mystical experiences made by Studstill (2005), Rose (2016), and others; many cases of individuals who have experienced expansive states of being outside the context (and without knowledge) of spiritual traditions; a number of similar themes in the process of spiritual awakening across various traditions (as presented in Taylor, 2016); accounts of the aftereffects of near-death experiences

and of the characteristics of post-traumatic growth; the inadequacy of attempts to explain these commonalities through neuroscientific reductionism, contextualism, or radical diffusion, and so on. My own research has also highlighted that both temporary awakening experiences and ongoing states of what I have called wakefulness often arise spontaneously outside spiritual traditions, allowing for the possibility that there are realms of more expansive potential human experience that precede and inform spiritual traditions (see Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017, for the most recent examples).

Ferrer (2002) has performed a worthwhile service to the field of transpersonal psychology by enacting the “participatory turn.” As he has noted, until the end of the 1990s, transpersonal psychology was strongly affiliated with perennialism (more specifically, with a “hard” perennialist approach). Hartelius (2017b) has written that perennialism was “introduced into psychology by Wilber” (p. 121), but as Ferrer (2002) has pointed out, Maslow (1970) had already suggested perennial perspectives before then, and numerous other transpersonal theorists besides Wilber adopted perennialist perspectives (for example, Vaughan, 1982; Grof, 1988; Harman, 1988; Wittine, 1989). As Ferrer (2002) has written, “the philosophical foundations of transpersonal theory have generally been associated with perennial philosophy ... and the spiritual universalism typical of perennialism pervades both early and modern transpersonal scholarship” (pp. 71-72). Indeed, as Ferrer (2002) has noted, transpersonal psychology was often *defined* in terms of perennialism or seen as an attempt to apply or justify the principles of perennialism.

This movement away from this strong association with perennialism has undoubtedly had a liberating and invigorating effect, partly due to the weakening influence of Wilber's overly abstract metaphysical model. However, it could be argued that the pendulum has swung too far away in the other direction, and that some transpersonal psychologists have been too extreme in their mistrust of metaphysics and any forms of essentialism (together with their reluctance to consider so-called supernatural and transcendent experiences) and in their desire to adopt avowedly scientific approaches. Ideally, in my view, this extreme swing will correct itself, and transpersonal psychology will find a new balance which incorporates more nuanced and subtle forms of perennialism (in other words, “softer” forms of perennialism, equivalent

to phenomenological perennialism or essentialism) and allows for cautious and carefully justified metaphysical claims.

### Cultural Differences

One should also be aware of cultural-geographical differences that inform attitudes to transpersonal psychology. The drive to “scientize” transpersonal psychology may have special significance to transpersonal theorists based in the United States, because of the particular status of transpersonal psychology there. Transpersonal psychology is certainly not an influential field in the UK, but it is not marginalized in the way that it is in the United States. The British Psychological Society (BPS) includes a Transpersonal Section, and many transpersonal psychologists (including myself) are members of the BPS and entitled to refer to themselves as psychologists. Generally speaking, the climate in psychology in the UK appears to be a little “softer” than that in the United States, and more open to perspectives and approaches that some psychologists might see as nonscientific. For example, the journal of the British Psychological Society (*The Psychologist*) has recently had themed issues devoted to qualitative research methods and research into psychedelics and has published articles on transpersonal-related themes such as ecstatic experiences, neurological interpretations of mystical experiences, and mindfulness. In the United States, transpersonal psychology appears to have a lower standing, and to be largely seen as pseudoscientific. It is therefore perhaps understandable that theorists such as Hartelius and Friedman have been working hard to advance its scientific credentials, by trying to free it from what skeptics call “woo,” and turning away from areas that are controversial from the perspective of materialist science (such as psi phenomena and mystical experiences).

In itself, this is a laudable enterprise. The invocation to make the field more research-based and to incorporate more quantitative (as well as qualitative) research is very welcome. However, as suggested above, the “scientizing” approach has arguably gone too far and runs the risk of separating transpersonal psychology from its traditional and natural alliance with post-materialist perspectives, and alienating the field from its potential adherents. Rather than adopting mainstream psychological approaches and distancing itself from other post-

materialist fields (such as near-death studies and parapsychology), it should cooperate with the latter in an effort to highlight the deficiencies of materialist metaphysics and the viability of post-materialist approaches. It is possible to envision a healthy form of transpersonal psychology that takes a rigorously scientific approach at the same time as adopting post-materialistic metaphysical perspectives, thereby making a significant contribution to cultural change.

A transpersonal psychologist I met at a conference recently told me that, despite repeated attempts to persuade her, she has never engaged in a written dialogue in an academic journal. She felt that the dialogue process can easily become a kind of alpha male dueling in which researchers hold fast to their own positions, take swipes at each other, and bat away each other’s criticisms, bouncing back and forth without reaching any resolution. This dialogue has certainly included those elements to some degree, but at the same time I feel that it has been productive, particularly in stimulating me to further deliberation and consideration of my own theories and approaches to research. I wish to thank Glenn Hartelius for the opportunity to debate these important issues and hope that we have stimulated other theorists to address them.

### Notes

1. In my view, throughout this dialogue, Hartelius has underestimated the influence of metaphysical assumptions, both within transpersonal approaches and science in general. For example, in Hartelius (2017b) a number of supposed non-metaphysical and non-authoritarian approaches to transpersonal psychology are recommended, including Friedman’s scientific approach and Ferrer’s participatory approaches. However, it is debatable whether either Friedman’s or Ferrer’s approaches are actually metaphysics-free. As Ferrer (2014) has argued, Friedman’s approach to transpersonal psychology “effectively binds transpersonal psychology to a naturalistic metaphysical worldview that is hostile to most spiritual knowledge claims” (p. 152). At the same time, I have argued above that Ferrer’s own approach includes metaphysical assumptions, and that his insistence on the undetermined nature of the “mystery” could be construed as a reluctance

to be open about his metaphysical position (Taylor, 2017a).

2. In Ferrer (2014) a similar approach to mine in this paper is suggested, with the view that rather than binding itself to scientific naturalism, transpersonal psychology should adopt an “open naturalism” that is free from materialism and reductionism and “open to both the ontological integrity of spiritual referents and the plausibility of subtle dimensions of reality” (p. 174).

## References

- Aaen-Stockdale, C. (2012). Neuroscience for the soul. *The Psychologist*, 25(7), 520-523.
- Al-Khalili, J. S. & McFadden, J. J. (2014). *Life on the edge: The coming of age of quantum biology*. London, UK: Bantam.
- Ball, P. (2011). Physics of life: The dawn of quantum biology. *Nature*, 474(7351), 272-274. <https://doi.org/10.1038/474272a>
- Beauregard, M., Schwartz, G. E., Miller, L., Dossey, L., Moreira-Almeida, A., Schlitz, M., ... & Tart C. (2014). Manifesto for a post-materialist science. *Explore*, 10(5), 272-274. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2014.06.008>
- Carter, C. (2010). Persistent denial: A century of denying the evidence. In S. Krippner & H. Friedman (Eds.), *Debating psychic experience* (pp. 77-110). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dawkins, R. (1998). *Unweaving the rainbow*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Dupré, J. (1993). *The disorder of things: Metaphysical foundations of the disunity of science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard 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. (2014). Transpersonal psychology, science and the supernatural. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 46(2), 152-186.
- 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>
- Grof, S. (1988). *The adventure of self-discovery; Dimensions of consciousness and new perspectives in psychotherapy and inner exploration*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hall, S. S. (2010). Revolution postponed: Why the human genome project has been disappointing. *Scientific American*, 303(4), 60-67. <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican1010-60>
- Harman, W. (1988). The transpersonal challenge to the scientific paradigm: The need for a restructuring of science. *Revision*, 11(2), 13-21.
- 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. (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. (2017c). Taylor's soft perennialism: Psychology or New Age spiritual vision? *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36(2), 136-146. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.136>
- 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>
- Healy, D. (2015). Serotonin and depression: The marketing of a myth. *British Medical Journal*, 350, h1771. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h1771>
- Heisenberg, W. (1958). *The physicists' conception of nature*. London, UK: Hutchinson.
- Huxley, T. H. (1874). On the hypothesis that animals are automata and its history. *Fortnightly Review*, 22, 555-589.
- James, W. (1892). *Psychology: Briefer course*. New York, NY: Henry Holt. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11060-000>
- James, W. (1978). The knowing of things together [1894 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association.] In F. H. Burkhardt. (Ed.), *The works of William James* (Vol. 5: *Essays in philosophy*, pp. 361-375). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1895)

- Jeans, J. (1937). *The mysterious universe*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Jeans, J. (1942/2009). *Physics and philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511694400>
- Kastrup, B. (2014). *Why materialism is baloney: How true skeptics know there is no death and fathom answers to life, the universe, and everything*. Winchester, UK: Iff Books.
- Kelly, E. F., Kelly, E. W., Crabtree, A., Gauld, A., Grosso, M., & Greyson, B. (2007). *Irreducible mind: Toward a psychology for the 21st century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kelly, E. F. (2007). Towards a psychology for the 21st century. In E. F. Kelly, E. Kelly, A. Crabtree, M. Gauld, M. Grosso, & B. Greyson (Eds.), *Irreducible mind: Toward a psychology for the 21st century* (pp. 577-644). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kelly, E. F., Crabtree, A., & Marshall, P. (Eds.). (2015). *Beyond physicalism: Toward reconciliation of science and spirituality*. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Koch, C. (2014) Is consciousness universal? *Scientific American Mind*, 25, 26-29.
- Lambeth, D. (1999). *William James and the metaphysics of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO978051148436>
- Lucretius (2007). *The nature of things*. (Trans. A. E. Stallings). London, UK: Penguin Classics.
- MacDonald, D. (2013). Philosophical underpinnings of transpersonal psychology as a science. In H. L. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of transpersonal psychology* (pp. 312-329). Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118591277.ch17>
- Mahner, M. (2012). The role of metaphysical naturalism in science. *Science and Education*, 21(10), 1437-1459. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-011-9421-9>
- Maslow, A. (1970). *Religions, values, and peak experiences*. New York, NY: Viking Press.
- Maudsley, H. (1879). Materialism and its lessons. *Popular Science Monthly*, 15, 667-683. <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican10111879-3135supp>
- Nagel, T. (2012). *Mind and cosmos: Why the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199919758.001.0001>
- Nietzsche, F. (2005). *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. (Trans. G. Parkes). Oxford, UK: Oxford World's Classics.
- Planck, M. (1931). *The universe in the light of modern physics*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Platinga, A. A. (2011). *Where the conflict really lies: Science, religion, and naturalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812097.001.0001>
- Radin, D. (2009). *The conscious universe: The scientific truth of psychic phenomena*. New York, NY: HarperOne.
- Rose, K. (2016). *Yoga, meditation, and mysticism: Contemplative universals and meditative landmarks*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Sartori, P. (2014). *The wisdom of near-death experiences*. London, UK: Watkins.
- 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(2), 93-110. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.93>
- 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.
- Taylor, S. (in press). *Spiritual science: Why science needs spirituality to make sense of the world*. London, UK: Watkins.
- Taylor, S., & Egeto-Szabo, K. (2017). Exploring awakening experiences. A study of awakening experiences in terms of their triggers, characteristics, duration and aftereffects. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 49(1), 45-65.
- Van Lommel, P. (2006). Near-death experience, consciousness, and the brain: A new concept about the continuity of our consciousness based on recent scientific research on near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest. *World Futures*, 62(1-2), 134-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02604020500412808>

- Vaughan, F. (1982). The transpersonal perspective: A personal account. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 14(1), 37-45.
- Wittine, B. (1989). Basic postulates for a transpersonal psychotherapy. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience* (pp. 269-287). New York, NY: Plenum Press. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-6989-3\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-6989-3_17)

### **About the Author**

**Steve Taylor, PhD**, is a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University, UK. He also teaches on the 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 *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 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](http://www.stevenmtaylor.com)

### **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](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).