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# Being In Uncertainties, Mysteries, Doubt<sup>1</sup>

(Commentary on Marks-Tarlow's "A Fractal Epistemology for Transpersonal Psychology")

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*A unification bridging and superseding the Newtonian-Galilean worldview on the one side and the romantic worldview on the other, bringing together mind and matter, the human sciences and the natural sciences, is to be found in an inclusive phenomenology—one that recognizes the physical world as but a domain of experience (instead of the absolute and exclusive foundation of the Real).*

—George Atwood [George Atwood's Deep Thoughts Journal (online), 2017, p. 5]

I was once, or, I should say, many times, out of my body. This was when, decades ago, sensory deprivation tanks were *de rigueur* on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. I can reliably say I had transcendental experiences, some of which were "out of body," but then once the black, warm saltwater catapulted me into a panic attack, that was it for me. Never again. I often wonder what additional frontiers, new landscapes, I could have explored had I not panicked. So much for the *rational* part of my brain. I cannot deny I have had other edge-of-my-seat experiences subsequently; perhaps I could call them transcendental, but never in the confines of a coffin-like tank. How can I account for them? And why the panic?

Unlike many other paradigms in the broader field of psychology, transpersonal psychology, and therapy, has never been squeamish about the anomaly, the novel, the unexpected. An exceptional contribution, Marks-Tarlow's article (2020, this issue; subsequent citations refer to this article) is a welcome and expansive deepening of our understanding and exploration of our intensely idiosyncratic experiential worlds, through fresh eyes and a unique perspective.

Transpersonal psychology's emphasis on the whole person, on not pathologizing, on not reducing what is human to categorical caricatures, deeply resonates not only with my own contemporary clinical and philosophical sensibilities, but also with a variety of burgeoning contextualist psychoanalytic perspectives beginning in the 1970's (e.g., Atwood & Stolorow, 1979). To my mind, Marks-Tarlow substantially extends these sensibilities in her

engaging exploration of fractal geometry. She addresses the transpersonal divide—essentially between an unremitting emphasis on emotional phenomenology, on the one hand, and the need for objective verification and explanation of such phenomena, empirically and objectivist based, on the other hand. This debate can be witnessed today in psychoanalysis wherein arguments about phenomenological contextualism versus neuroscientific study of the brain continue to unfold. And happily, there are integrationists, such as Seligman (2005), who aim to incorporate a complexity sensibility into both sides of the debate. Marks-Tarlow highlights the Friedman-Ferrer argument: Friedman's claim to objectivity, posits Ferrer, is "guilty of its own charge" (p. xx). Every perspective, is, well, just that, a perspective—one of many. There is no view from nowhere (Nagel, 1986). Marks-Tarlow aims to heal this divide, "an ever-widening schism between these two positions" (p. xx). She proposes the mathematics of fractal geometry as "model, method, and metaphor for otherwise ambiguous and inaccessible transpersonal phenomena" (p. xx).

Why do we need corroborative evidence to substantiate our transpersonal experiences? Why are we intrigued by an fMRI that affords us a peek at our neuronal infrastructure? Is that where the action is? Is it our human propensity to want to validate and concretize our lived, subjective experience, born of our unique organizing principles and interpretative activity, that gives rise to what we consider to be true and real? Perhaps. Perhaps we need to feel that what

we experience is indeed true and real. Descartes was a glaring example of our human proclivity for fundamental doubt, search for clarity, and “irritable grasping after fact and reason” (Keats, 1817/1899, p. 277), while eventually also the epitome of having to arrive at conclusions that felt rational and reliable. Was my own panic simple claustrophobia, or was it perhaps an emergent property and product of having my heretofore “true and real” world confronted, opposed, and turned on its head?

If we are to apply a more scientifically rigorous model to transpersonal phenomena, personally I cannot think of a more conducive and persuasive methodology than fractal geometry, as beautifully outlined by Marks-Tarlow. Fractal geometry is uniquely suited for mapping and understanding seemingly messy natural phenomena—the noise in the universe, reiterated throughout innumerable mass, space, and time scales, that philosophers and scientists traditionally tended to ignore or dismiss as irrelevant anomalies. Generally our universe had been neat, tidy, and rational. While Newton and others may have stood on the shoulders of giants, their view was not far-reaching enough to anticipate the radical complexity of our lives and of our world in which we are relentlessly embedded. Complexity theorists from a variety of disciplines such as Poincaré and Guillaume (1900), Lorenz (1963), Bertalanffy (1968), Laszlo (1972), Kauffman (1995), Bak (1996), and Cilliers (1998), just to name a few, fortuitously introduced to us a multi-faceted, groundbreaking paradigm with which we can grasp an exponentially richer and more complex view of how our world works. And this sensibility has advantageously infiltrated the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis (Thelen & Smith, 1994, 2005; Stolorow, 1997; Piers, 2000; Marks-Tarlow, 2011; Seligman, 2005; Coburn, 2014; and many others), offering us a deeper glance into and respect for the complexity of human experiencing and meaning-making—I believe, one of the hallmarks of the endeavor of transpersonal psychology. Intertwined within a complex systems framework is the fractal geometry with which Marks-Tarlow elegantly bridges the Friedman-Ferrer divide.

That said, coming from a complexity, contextualist, and phenomenologically based perspective in contemporary psychoanalysis, my own bias resides

in eschewing any notions of objectivity insofar as such objectivism presumes a clear and pristine view of psychological or even natural phenomena. Each of us is relentlessly *situated*, and each of our respective situatednesses is as individually and uniquely contoured as the fractals about which Marks-Tarlow writes. Admittedly, many of us wish for an *objective* world with objective facts, one we can rely upon, one familiar to us, one we can awake to tomorrow morning—hence our “irritable grasping after fact and reason.” Adam Phillips (1999) once remarked: “Fear of the unknown [and I would add, of transpersonal experience] is cured through flight into the intelligible... The familiar, the unsurprising, restores our collusive sanity” (pp. 110–111). And in the clinical realm, as I have written elsewhere, “there is nothing quite like the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual if you are looking for a convenient device to reduce the complexity and contextuality of experiencing and meaning-making down to two-dimensional caricatures of what is human” (2014, p. 62). Flight into the intelligible obscures our existential panic.

Marks-Tarlow ambitiously offers us a “novel epistemology for transpersonal psychology” and, I believe, thereby advances our field in directions useful in not only narrowing the epistemological divide, but also in privileging “what is unique, irregular, and rare in nature, including [most notably] human subjective experience” (p. xx). She tells us, “transpersonal psychology is in need of a more holistic scientific/mathematical fractal framework that helps to embrace the full breadth and depth of its psychological and experiential scope” (p. xx). And I would argue further that fractal geometry in particular, alongside our contextualist paradigms that privilege non-reductionist, non-pathologizing, non-objectivist perspectives, can only improve and expand any domain that takes the slightest interest in human experiencing and its attendant meanings—the stranger and more unique, the better! Strangeness, uniqueness, creativity, and novelty are quintessentially human. And this sensibility is especially vital in the consultation room.

Of her many reflections on fractals, Marks-Tarlow references the sticky problem of consciousness and conscious awareness. And while she states that she is not offering us a theory of consciousness per

se, she does assert, vis-à-vis fractal geometry, that the “structure of subjective experience” includes “open boundaries between conscious awareness and physical, natural levels of brain, body, and surrounding environment” (p. xx). I concur: There can be no consciousness without world, and no world without consciousness. The two are relentlessly and inextricably intertwined, and evolutionarily have always been mutually constitutive. This is the radical contextualism that drives my clinical work, including my assumption that my patients’ experiences are not *epiphenomena* and always emerge at the interface of one’s history, one’s present, one’s imagined future, one’s physical state, one’s relations with others, and one’s world in general.

Marks-Tarlow speaks of the “subjective feeling of fuzzy boundaries and infinite extension” (p. xx), or, in general, “nondual awareness” (p. xx). I believe this type of experience reflects circumstances in which, in my own vernacular, the realm of the *phenomenological* happens to be coinciding with the realm of the *explanatory* (which it does not always do). That is to say, *explanatorily speaking*, lived subjective experience is always understood as a product and property of larger complex, highly networked, relational systems, subject to the characteristics of nonlinearity, unpredictability, disequilibrium, and complexity (in the complexity theory sense of the term). It is messy and networked, and in that sense has no boundaries. *Phenomenologically speaking*, however, we do not necessarily *experience* ourselves that way, as boundary-less, extended, and intensely networked. Indeed, we may experience ourselves at times as singular, unfettered, agentic, disconnected from the world, even alienated, and quite alone with what we think of as our personal individuality, our self. These instances of our experiencing technically do not match up, experientially, with the feel of the underlying systems latticework in which we are always embedded. Phenomenologically, anything goes—all dimensions of experience are possible. And sometimes, perhaps in more transcendental states of mind, we *can* experience the fuzzy boundaries and infinite extension of which Marks-Tarlow speaks, in which case as I alluded to previously, we are closer *in experience* to our originary matrices and

their infinitely far-reaching networks compared to the more singular, isolated-mind mode of living in which we typically negotiate our daily lives. Familiar experience is pregnant with infinite possibilities.

In addition to working at bridging epistemological gaps—an enormous undertaking—I especially applaud Marks-Tarlow for her scientific and mathematical rigor in addressing the unique, the novel, and the complex in human nature and human experiencing. Fractal geometry, a persuasive framework for better appreciating the foundation of our emotional lives and our experiences of nonduality, can only enhance and extend our clinical work into realms unknown to more linear, traditional, and *evidence-based* perspectives. Her fractal epistemology is indeed a much-needed corrective to the philosophies of objectivism, individualism, and traditionalism that otherwise unfortunately continue to pervade our field.

## Endnotes

- 1 Quoted from John Keat’s (1817/1899) letter to his brothers, George and Thomas.
- 2 William J. Coburn is Founding Editor Emeritus of *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context* (formerly the *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*), Associate Editor of *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, and an Editorial Board Member of *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*.

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**William J. Coburn, PhD, PsyD**, is a psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist and Founding Editor Emeritus and Consulting Editor of the International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology, Associate

Editor of Psychoanalytic Dialogues, and an Editorial Board Member of Psychoanalytic Inquiry. His most recent book is titled *Psychoanalytic Complexity: Clinical Attitudes for Therapeutic Change* (Routledge, 2014). Coburn's commentary, entitled "Being In Uncertainties, Mysteries, Doubt" supports Marks-Tarlow's unique efforts to reconcile subjective, emotional elements with objective explanation and verification, likening it to contemporary psychoanalysis, wherein arguments about phenomenological contextualism versus neuroscientific study of the brain continue to unfold, although Coburn's personal bias is to eschew notions of objectivity vis-a-vis the "relentlessly situated" nature of personal experience.

### About the Journal

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