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# The Origin (and Future) of Transpersonal Psychology in an Open Scientific Naturalism (Introduction to the Special Topic Section)

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A number of scholars well known within transpersonal psychology appear to be converging on open scientific naturalism as a philosophically and methodologically fruitful framework for transpersonal and related fields. This builds on the nascent open naturalism evidenced in the early years of transpersonal psychology, before it entered its metaphysical phase (ca. 1975 to 2000). Since it is necessary for science to assume some kind of world within which it is possible to do science, and not every aspect of that assumed world can be subjected to processes of empirical investigation, some of these necessary background assumptions are unavoidably metaphysical. However, the fact that these are unavoidable does not justify the insertion of foreground metaphysical explanations for psychological or spiritual phenomena. Rather than attempting to broaden psychology by adding metaphysics, an open scientific naturalism can make it more inclusive and more scientific by disputing metaphysically based disbeliefs based on specifically Western background reality assumptions.

**Keywords:** *transpersonal psychology, open scientific naturalism, empirical research, Western philosophy, metaphysical explanations, background reality assumptions, post-materialism, non-reductive phlogical positivism, mysticism, spirituality, exceptional human experiences*

I don't remember taking my first steps, but they were surely as ungraceful and short-lived as those of most toddlers. Learning is a messy process marked more by setbacks, defeats, and half-victories than outright successes. The growth of science is no different, and selective "histories" of the discipline apply a veneer of unbroken progress to what has been a shuffling emergence littered with false starts and failures (cf. Singham, 2019). Though mature in some technologies, human societies still wobble on unsure legs toward a precarious future. It should be no surprise, then, that the philosophical foundations informing scientific culture likely require some revision since their inception in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Complaints abound about how covert Western ideological strictures narrow the study of psychology; the transpersonal field is rife with critiques of how these foundations impose biases into what should be more impartial scientific processes (e.g., Hartelius, 2019). There is unquestionably

urgent need for revision of some deeply rooted yet extra-scientific assumptions about the nature of reality. But notwithstanding idealistic manifestos (e.g., Beauregard et al., 2014; Cardeña, 2014) and optimistic predictions for change (e.g., Tart, 2009), it will take years of concerted effort, a good deal of patiently gathered evidence, and the luck of favorable winds in culture for lasting change to come. When that step forward does come, it will likely be preferable to what came before, even if similarly incomplete and imperfect.

This leaves transpersonal psychology in the awkward position of needing to buck against implicit assumptions within current science and psychology in order to study phenomena and constructs central to its topic area. The challenge has led some within the transpersonal field to advocate for the inclusion of metaphysical explanations of mystical, spiritual, and exceptional human experience, arguing that since metaphysical assumptions are inescapable they should instead be embraced (e.g., Cunningham,

2019a, 2019b; Taylor, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2022) as part of a post-materialist stance that can support a shift away from the harmful impacts of materialism (Taylor, 2017b). In doing so, it is claimed, transpersonal psychology would be aligning with its traditional metaphysical orientation (Taylor, 2022; cf. summary in Daniels, 2022). However, this approach mistakenly conflates two different categories of metaphysics, misinterprets post-materialism, and misrepresents the relationship of transpersonal psychology to metaphysics in its early years. A more pragmatic, more scientific, and in fact more common response within transpersonal psychology is to instead apply an open naturalism that is less encumbered by specifically Western reality assumptions that have permeated some of scientific culture.

### **Transpersonal Psychology's First Orientation Was an Open Scientific Naturalism**

At least two of the key founders of transpersonal psychology—Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich—pursued a nascent version of something much closer to science based in an open naturalism. Maslow, transpersonal psychology's most prominent founder and the one who lent his considerable credibility to its conception, was an empirical researcher in primate behavior (e.g., Maslow, 1936, 1940; Harlow et al., 1932) who shifted to the study of human motivation. Yet Maslow combined his rigorous science with a naturalism that was unusually open and discerning. For example, he argued that the version of objectivity typically used in science was not sufficiently impartial because it was driven by utilitarian human priorities (Maslow, 1964/1970); he argued that an appreciative objectivity that sought to understand natural phenomena *on their own terms* would be more effective. Given his more flexible stance it may be tempting to imagine that Maslow's openness extended beyond the boundaries of science, and to read metaphysics into some of his writings, such as his 1969(a) paper, "Various Meanings of Transcendence." However, careful examination will show that even his categories in this paper such as "transcendence of time" (p. 56) and "transcendence of space" (p. 63) refer to qualities of phenomenological experience, not elevation into some hidden dimension of reality.

Likewise, Anthony Sutich, founding editor of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (JTP), wrote the journal's Statement of Purpose in a way that specifically emphasized the role of empirical research (Hartelius, 2021; Lajoie et al., 1991): he indicated that this new transpersonal journal was "concerned with the publication of theoretical and applied research, original contributions, *empirical* papers, articles, and studies" in subjects of interest to the transpersonal field (Lajoie et al., 1991, pp. 175–176, emphasis in original). Worthy of particular note is the one key difference from the Statement of Purpose that Sutich had written eight years earlier for the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (JHP) in 1961, which he also founded: that journal he described as "concerned with the publication of theoretical and applied research, original contributions, papers, articles, and studies," without specific reference to empirical work (Sutich, 1969, p. 12). His statement for the transpersonal journal, then, *added specific reference to "empirical" papers, and placed the term in italics.*

This same attitude can be seen in the earliest inspiration for the founding of the transpersonal field. Anthony Sutich (1976), in the text of his dissertation describing the founding of the transpersonal field, reported that an interest in mystical experience was awakened in him at a 1966 Humanistic Theology seminar at Esalen Institute. He then realized that his actual interest was "in the psychology of mysticism, modified by humanistic considerations and the Western attitude of empiricism" (p. 8). In June of 1967, Maslow sent Sutich a lengthy manuscript which he considered "the culmination of 30 years of work in psychology" (p. 11)—a paper titled, "A Theory of Metamotivation: The Biological Rooting of the Value-Life" (Maslow, 1967). It was in response to this Maslow paper that Sutich (1976) would formulate his first draft of the Statement of Purpose for what would become *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (p. 13). Amid their enthusiasm, the emphasis on empirical research of human phenomena that are biologically based is unmistakable. It is hard to imagine that Maslow or Sutich were relishing the opportunity to reduce mysticism and human values to some narrow version of materialism—which would hardly be a novel or inspiring contribution. It seems rather more likely that their enthusiasm for this enterprise was awakened by the prospect of using empirical methods to demonstrate

that self-centered survival did not drive all animal behavior, and the inherent potentials of biologically rooted human nature went well beyond what Western psychology had previously allowed (cf. Grogan, 2008; Vailunas, 2011).

This view appears to be specifically confirmed by Maslow in the preface to his 1962 edition of *Toward a Psychology of Being*, in which he equated his notion of *self-actualization* with both *psychological health* and *full-humanness*, describing these as "the development of the biologically based nature of man, [that] therefore is (empirically) normative for the whole species rather than for particular times and places" (p. iii). Maslow sought to ground the commonalities of human nature's "farther reaches" (1969a)—its tendencies toward altruism, autonomy, and selfless dedication, and the peak experiences that at times accompanied these aspirations—in the soil of shared human biology rather than in lofty metaphysical visions (Maslow, 1962). He argued that the striving for these was no less biologically founded, no less necessary for survival, than the drive toward selfishness—and that his claims in this regard were empirically based.

However, with the passing of Maslow and Sutich—in 1970 and 1976 respectively—the field departed sharply from this early vision of an exploratory open naturalism. It shifted from a field with scientific interest in experiences often associated with metaphysical explanations, to the direct embrace of those metaphysical explanations. In doing so, it became something quite different than what Maslow and Sutich had founded, and placed itself at some remove from the discipline of psychology.

What should be plainly acknowledged here is that from its early years there has been a divide between those in the field who followed in the fledgling open scientific naturalism of Maslow and Sutich, and those who preferred to ground the field more explicitly in syncretic metaphysical schemas such as Ken Wilber's. Beginning around 1975, it was proponents of syncretic metaphysics who came to hold sway. With behind-the-scenes support from the new JTP editor, Miles Vich (cf. Ferrer & Puente, 2013), Wilber's metaphysically based neo-perennialist spiritual framework (cf. Ferrer, 2002; Hanegraaff, 1996; Hartelius, 2017a) became the *de facto* philosophical foundation of transpersonal psychology (cf. Rothberg, 1986).

The preeminence of metaphysics in the field came to an end in the early 2000s with several events: Ken Wilber (2000) withdrew from the transpersonal field, Jorge Ferrer (2002) articulated a non-metaphysical framework for spiritual pluralism, Harris Friedman (2002) formally called for transpersonal psychology to function as a science, and the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* (IJTS) transferred to the editorship of Harris Friedman and Douglas MacDonald (2003). Friedman (1983) had previously created the first explicitly transpersonal measure and applied it in ways that clearly illustrated how a version of open naturalism could function within transpersonal psychology in the conduct of systematic empirical research (Friedman, 2018b, 2021). These events set the stage for reemergence of the field's early forays into a science-based open naturalism.

Due to the predominant influence of syncretic metaphysics from roughly 1975 to 2000, it might appear that the field has been unambiguously associated with metaphysical leanings since its inception. But there are few grounds for such an interpretation. In its early years the field was feeling its way forward into unknown territory, with an open-ended and exploratory mix of papers. Considering those papers that engaged with the topic of metaphysics as more than a passing mention during Sutich's editorship (1969–1975), it is possible to recognize both an incipient open naturalism, and an active interest in metaphysics. However, there is no indication of a framework for psychology grounded in syncretic metaphysics prior to Wilber's 1975 paper, "Psychologia Perennis: The Spectrum of Consciousness."

For those interested in a detailed review of the topic of metaphysics in early transpersonal journal papers (other readers may skip this paragraph and the next), papers discussing the topic of metaphysics published from 1969 through 1971 included a Maslow (1969b) reference to background reality assumptions, two papers attempting comparisons between metaphysics and new areas of physics (Green & Green, 1971; LeShan, 1969), and a paper by Pahnke and Richards (1969) suggesting that LSD's effects made mystical experiences available to experimental conditions.



Two additional papers related to the latter topic, but not making specific mention of metaphysics, attempted a biological interpretation of mystical union (Maven, 1969), and comparisons between mysticism and schizophrenia (Wapnick, 1969). One paper mentioned metaphysics in the context of a Western encounter with the spirituality of Zen Buddhism (Hart, 1970). The closest approach to the approval of metaphysics within science came from Harman (1969), who proposed that in a new science, metaphors from religious or metaphysical systems might be more appropriate relative to certain areas of human experience than their rather barren scientific counterparts. But there is no indication of movement toward a metaphysical foundation for psychology, or even for psychological constructs.

One account in this earlier period reported on a person who claimed to have experienced a metaphysical truth directly while under the influence of LSD. This possibility was subsequently amplified by Grof (1972, 1973), who described LSD experiences of patients in terms hinting that some of these might represent recall or perception that was veridical in some sense other than constructs related to physiological or psychological processes. Two other brief mentions of metaphysics were not of new significance (Bernbaum, 1974; Watts, 1974). It is in the context of these early curiosities about mystical and spiritual human potentials that Wilber published his 1975 paper proposing a syncretic metaphysical framework for grounding both psychology and spirituality—a concept that was novel to psychology in its approach as well as its specific content. That this was a new and original combination is reflected in Hanegraaff's (1996) characterization of Wilber's work as formative within the category of New Age religion.

The years when JTP was under Sutich's editorship suggest that early transpersonal scholars were interested to know how much of what was traditionally languaged in mystical or metaphysical terms might eventually be grounded in scientific evidence. But it should be clear from this brief review that metaphysics was not at all the field's "traditional association" during this early period. For promoters of metaphysics in psychology, it would likely be overly optimistic to read the field's subsequent 25-year metaphysical phase back into these first years.

### **Metaphysics Are Only Unavoidable In Background Reality Assumptions**

While it is not possible to avoid some form of metaphysics as a backdrop even for science, proponents of metaphysical explanations make rather too much of this fact. What is lacking is a distinction between background reality assumptions and foreground explanations. Roy Bhaskar (1975/1997) wisely noted that "every account of science presupposes an ontology [in the sense that] it presupposes a schematic answer to the question of what the world must be like for science to be possible" (p. 59). Only some of these essential assumptions will be empirically demonstrable. However, this inescapable limitation of background reality assumptions cannot be legitimately used to justify the construction of metaphysical foreground explanations of specific phenomena.

Yet this is precisely the strategy employed by Steve Taylor and Paul Cunningham in their advocacy for metaphysics in transpersonal psychology. Taylor has repeatedly pointed to the necessity of background reality assumptions, and used this fact to justify his own foreground metaphysical explanations of specific psychological phenomena; for example, in his 2017(b) paper that encouraged a move beyond materialism, Taylor rightly pointed out that in science "some form of metaphysical paradigm will always be in the background" (p. 148); this is the valid argument for inescapable background assumptions. He proceeded to identify some of the deleterious effects that accrue when these background assumptions are of the sort prevalent in Western culture—to which he has applied the term "materialism." Other than pointing out that materialism is a general term that applies to many more things than Taylor means, he will have no complaint from me on this.

But then Taylor (2017b, 2022) argued for replacement of this materialism with a post-materialist vision that, conveniently, would sanction his *metaphysically based foreground explanation* that an all-pervasive spiritual force is the source for his own spiritual experiences as well as those of peoples from all other spiritual traditions and orientations (Taylor, 2016). This conclusion simply does not follow, any more than flaws in the justice system can

be used to condone general lawlessness. In addition, it naïvely interprets phenomenal experiences in peripersonal space as veridical events in Euclidean space (cf. Barrett & Quigley, 2021; Hartelius, 2016a; Hartelius et al., 2022). While one can grant Taylor's general claim that some form of metaphysics is unavoidable, this fact does not justify the sort of specific metaphysical explanations that Taylor (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2022) has advanced. The difference between indispensable reality assumptions and optional metaphysical constructions is a bright and clear line; it is not a distinction that "admits of degrees" (Cunningham, 2019a) any more than paying taxes is on some sort of blurry continuum with buying an ice cream cone: both involve money, but the fact that one is inevitable while the other is entirely optional makes them discrete types of transaction.

A more complex version of this strategy has been developed by Cunningham (2019a, 2019b), which is problematic in such a variety of ways that a thorough rebuttal would likely exhaust many readers. Moreover, the effort would not be well spent given that Cunningham's lengthy discourse accomplishes little to nothing: all of the types of experience that he or Taylor have interest in are already amenable to empirical study under an open scientific naturalism, the critiques of Western background reality assumptions are already implied in such an open naturalism, and none of the arguments they have put forward can legitimize the incorporation of metaphysically based foreground explanations in psychology.

The point of differentiation is that Cunningham and Taylor seem to believe that if empirical evidence validates a given phenomenon, it also validates an associated *metaphysical interpretation* of that phenomenon. For example, Cunningham (2019a) suggested that "a *generalized* empirical method does not preclude the examination and evaluation of metaphysical and 'supranatural' claims ... that are accompanied by psychological effects and/or physical correlates" (p. 20). Cunningham's assumption here is that physiological effects *interpreted as* the impact of a metaphysical force are *evidence of* that metaphysical force.

This parallels Taylor's (2017b) claim that "there is no reason why transpersonal psychology should exclude metaphysical claims, as long as they

are inferred or implied by research and evidence" (p. 16). Here again is the assumption that metaphysical phenomena can be inferred from empirical results. This is not the case. If there is direct evidence for some phenomenon, then that phenomenon is no longer metaphysical; if that demonstrated phenomenon is *believed to be the result of a metaphysical force*, that empirical evidence *does not accrue to the assumed metaphysical cause*. To believe otherwise is a common logical fallacy, known as *affirming the consequent*. By way of illustration, falling prey to this logical fallacy would mean that if I believe fire hydrants are installed by aliens, then I would take the presence of fire hydrants as proof that aliens exist. This case for metaphysical explanations fails, but that failure does not preclude careful scientific research into valued experiential phenomena that would ordinarily be dismissed based on the metaphysics of Western reality assumptions.

To briefly consider several additional points advanced by Cunningham (2019a), he has, contrary to evidence, imputed to Hartelius and others such as Daniels, Friedman, and MacDonald the position that transpersonal psychology should "be an empirical science like physics, chemistry, astronomy, and biology" (p. 9), that these scholars are proponents of "logical positivism" (p. 7) who hold the goal of applying strictly those methods effective for the study of "impersonal, inanimate objects" (p. 9) to transpersonal phenomena. Cunningham has then included "the phenomenal" (p. 10)—namely, properties experienced in the mind—among those "aspects of transpersonal phenomena that are receptive to conventional research methods associated with the physical sciences" (pp. 9–10).

These claims are problematic. For example, the physical sciences are those that study non-living systems, and unless I have missed recent research on the lived experiences of igneous rock or carbon dioxide, lumping phenomenology with methods "associated with the physical sciences" (p. 10), or with logical positivism, is simply wrong. Moreover, Cunningham's (2019a) imputation of such a radical position to these authors is a demonstrably false and gratuitously polemical charge that plays to the justifiable anxieties of many with strong interest in the transpersonal field. This sort of ill-considered

rhetoric serves to inflame unfounded fears that inclusion of empirical research—and specifically quantitative methods—will somehow result in the reduction or dismissal of exactly the types of exceptional experiences that are of interest in the transpersonal field.

That Cunningham's (2019a) claims are entirely fictitious can be seen in examples of my work published well before his jeremiad. I have pointed out the value of first-person methods and the need to consider the influence of state of consciousness on every method of inquiry (Hartelius, 2007), critiqued the apparent exclusion of the subject-ness of the mind and the human-ness of the person within some approaches to scientific psychology (Hartelius, 2014a), and pointed out the problematic nature of "philosophical assumptions about the nature of mind and matter and reality that preclude asking the sorts of questions or designing the methods that might lead to a more useful understanding of subtle and exceptional experiences" (p. iv). My work has pointed to the psychological importance of "flashes of insight, moments of flow, of deep absorption, intuition, gut instinct, spiritual and mystical encounters, tastes of profound connection with the world, [and] empathic bonds that open something far deeper than words" (Hartelius, 2016b, p. iv); I have argued for novel approaches to study the person as a living system embedded in larger contexts, and complained that the marginalization of rigorous parapsychological research comes from evaluating these findings based on Western philosophy's conventional reality models rather than on empirical evidence. I have also proposed an approach to decreasing the influence of metaphysical Western materialist reality assumptions in science more broadly (Hartelius, 2019).

This small sampling of a repeated theme in my writing, also evidenced in works by other of the named scholars (e.g., Daniels, 2021; Friedman, 2021), shows a deep sympathy for what both Cunningham (2019a) and Taylor (e.g., 2022) have identified as a philosophically-rooted narrowness in much of psychology. Despite dire forecasts by Cunningham and Taylor, decades of productive empirical work in both parapsychology (e.g., Cardeña, 2018) and transpersonal psychology (Hartelius, 2021) have only sharpened awareness

of philosophical issues in psychology (Friedman, 2021; Hartelius, 2019) and stimulated development of additional methodological tools (e.g., Hlava et al., 2014; King & DeCicco, 2009; López et al., 2017). My response has been to work with others toward development of approaches and methods designed to incrementally mitigate these problems (e.g., Hartelius, 2007, 2015, 2019, 2020; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Hartelius et al., 2022), as a pragmatic alternative to the uncritical embrace of metaphysical explanations for psychological phenomena.

The present paper should put to rest concerns that Friedman or myself reject inclusion of any discussion of metaphysics (Cunningham, 2019a; Daniels, 2021; Taylor, 2022; cf. Friedman, 2021; Hartelius, 2019). There is agreement that metaphysical background reality assumptions based in Western culture should not impede the study of valued human experiences and capacities, an agreement that existed prior to these dialogues with Taylor and Cunningham. The point of dissent centers on use of foreground metaphysical explanations for certain experiential phenomena, a remedy that is incompatible with psychology, unnecessary for the study of these phenomena, and would likely add little more than slight variations to a replay of Wilber's failed efforts to install nonessential metaphysical constructions into the heart of psychology (Hartelius, 2017a).

### **Post-Materialism is not License for Metaphysical Smuggling**

Another argument advanced in Taylor's (2017a, 2017b, 2022) case for inclusion of foreground metaphysics favors some form of post-materialism, bolstered by the promise that with commitment to this type of orientation transpersonal psychology can support a cultural shift away from the deleterious effects of materialism. Again, the issue here is not Taylor's critique of the impact of a narrow Western materialism; it is his relatively simplistic interpretation of post-materialism, and his inadequate remedies for what is a complex sociological, scientific, and philosophical challenge. Taylor appears to have interpreted post-materialism in a way that permits the insertion of his own speculative spiritual interpretations into psychology—what

Daniels (2021) has aptly termed “metaphysical smuggling.” Taylor’s imaginative interpretation of post-materialism is problematic.

Post-materialism began as a description of a shift in societal values away from a focus on material security and towards self-expression, egalitarianism, and ecological concerns, first popularized by Ronald Inglehart (1977/2015) in his work, *The Silent Revolution* (cf. Inglehart, 1971). More recently, this term has been adopted by some in fields such as psychology, spirituality, consciousness, and parapsychology to label an approach to science that aspires to overcome philosophically rooted delimitations of science in contemporary scientific culture (e.g., Beauregard et al., 2014). In both usages, the shift is nuanced: individuals with post-materialist values are “post” in the sense that they aligned with a set of values that has emerged in the wake of an earlier societal focus on values aligned with wealth acquisition; these are not reactionaries who have turned against all material goods and who want to leave cities so as to live off of the land as hunter-gatherers. Similarly, post-materialist science is a vision for the kind of science that simply comes *after* an earlier version that has been artificially constrained by narrow Western materialist assumptions about reality; it is not a version of science that has turned against core scientific principles in order to embrace foreground metaphysical explanations.

A post-materialist science would not be intent on adopting metaphysical explanations for psychological phenomena, or any other phenomena, because then it would no longer be a science. That this is the case can be seen in the manifesto for its creation that was endorsed by a number of scholars who are well known within the transpersonal field: “Science is first and foremost a nondogmatic, open-minded method of acquiring knowledge about nature through the observation, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of phenomena” (Beauregard et al., 2014); signers included Larry Dossey, Lisa Miller, Rupert Sheldrake, Marilyn Schlitz, Gary Schwartz, and Charles Tart. This manifesto is a call for a more open-minded naturalism—which I argue should include a critique of constraints imposed by culturally

situated background reality assumptions. Nowhere in this manifesto is there even a hint of advocacy for the inclusion of foreground explanations that are metaphysical in nature.

Such a position is consistent with Maslow’s thought, and with open naturalism positions held by Daniels (2021, 2022), Friedman (2015; 2021), Ferrer (2014)—notably the first to name this formulation within the transpersonal field—and myself (2019); it is also congruent with Etzel Cardeña’s (2014) call for “an open, informed study of all aspects of consciousness” (p. 1), a paper signed by 100 scholars worldwide including many who are familiar in transpersonal psychology: Daryl Bem, Menas Kafatos, Dean Radin, Charles Tart, Max Velmans, Julie Beischel, Allan Leslie Combs, Arnaud Delorme, Harris Friedman, Bruce Greyson, Jeffrey Kripal, Stanley Krippner, David Luke, Julia Mossbridge, Chris Roe, Gary Schwartz, Christine Simmonds-Moore, Mário Simões, Lance Storm, Harald Walach, and of course Etzel Cardeña.

Relative to these, the metaphysical solution advocated by Cunningham and Taylor appears to be an outlier, one that is much more congruent with the characteristics of a New Age religion (Hanegraaff, 1996; Hartelius, 2017b).

### **What is the Shape of a Psychological Science Based in Open Naturalism?**

Naturalism is the philosophical result of eliminating supernaturalism (Papineau, 2021), the notion that there are aspects of existence belonging to a radically different and superior reality—typically divine or spiritual in nature. With conventional Western naturalism, the key issue for psychology is its logical tendency to reduce consciousness and mental phenomena to nothing more than the measurable physical events with which they are associated. This is problematic for a number of reasons, such as the fact that the philosophy and science that leads to such conclusions exist only in people (cf. Rogers, 1955), and if the fruits of a human endeavor appear to invalidate the reality of those who undertake it, then it seems fitting to recognize the process as self-negating rather than submit to its conclusions. Cardeña (2014, 2018) has moreover offered an empirical case against



reductive elimination of consciousness-related phenomena.

Whether or not mind and consciousness exist distinguishably from the biochemical processes with which they are associated is a question about background reality that cannot be bracketed in the same way as metaphysical beliefs associated with religion: either mind and consciousness have some actual existence *per se*, or they do not—and both conclusions are metaphysical because there is no current prospect that the nature of these foundational aspects of human experience can be investigated empirically. When the scientific subject is polymer chemistry or thermodynamics, the default scientific assumption that negates mentality is of minor consequence; when the subject is psychology, the impact is profound.

However, if a psychology seeks to counter this impact by positively affirming the primacy of consciousness (e.g., Beauregard, 2014), or of lived experience (Robbins, 2016), it is simply committing itself to an alternate metaphysical position. Since scientific psychology sees its typical denial of consciousness as a disbelief in metaphysics, rather than recognizing it as a *metaphysical disbelief*—that is, a rejection based on metaphysical criteria rather than empirical evidence (Hartelius, 2019)—psychological affirmation of consciousness is merely an alternate metaphysics. Although I have expressed a personal opinion favoring alternate metaphysics of this sort and agreed with others espousing such views (Hartelius, 2013, 2016a), I have come to appreciate that such an assertion is little more fruitful than disagreeing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Since any answer to the question of consciousness is metaphysical, a preferable strategy for transpersonal psychology may be to *bracket the question*, and embrace a metaphysical agnosticism (Ferrer, 2014). This effectively rejects the erasure of mind and consciousness (cf. Cardaña, 2014), and increases the neutrality of scientific psychology. Consciousness-related research can thereby proceed in a variety of directions without commitment to a particular metaphysics that either favors or excludes consciousness; it will then be empirical results, not philosophy, that determines whether a particular line

of research is fruitful. An open naturalism that does not prejudge the nature of what is actually so has in fact been explicitly endorsed by a former President of the American Psychological Association (Stroud, 2004).

Philosophically, an open naturalism can be justified by one of any number of strategies including non-reductive physicalism (e.g., Strawson, 2006), dual aspect monism (e.g., Benovsky 2016), and intersubjective approaches such as participatory thought (e.g., Ferrer, 2002, 2014, 2017; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013). I have argued that science would be more scientific if its specifically Western reality assumptions are denied veto power over what constitutes evidence (Hartelius, 2014a), over how diversities will be adequately reflected (Hartelius, 2014b), and in defining what is possible (and what is an “exceptional claim”) for the person and the human mind (Hartelius, 2019).

Describing the problem that bedevils researchers, scholars, and readers who hold a more expansive view of science (and of consciousness), and even naming a solution, is simpler than giving shape and form to that solution. Whether or not the solution comes under the banner of “naturalism” or “materialism” or “consciousness” may matter less than whether it allows for the world to disclose itself to us, empirically, rather than placing *a priori* restraints on what is real or possible (cf. Ferrer, 2014; Stroud, 2004), or constructing gratuitous metaphysical embellishments (Daniels, 2022; Ferrer, 2002; Friedman, 2021). The more pragmatic question concerns how transpersonal will participate in cultivating a psychology of the whole person, and of all persons (Hartelius, 2019).

It may be too early to articulate in detail what a scientific transpersonal psychology would look like if it were based explicitly in a more open naturalism. Such a field would certainly work to identify and measure experiences valued as beneficial by cultures or by numerous individuals, but that are marginalized or dismissed by conventional psychology. While research results would not be limited by conventional Western reality assumptions, an open scientific naturalism would not advance or accept metaphysical explanations. This rather logical consequence follows from the fact that research results are interpreted based on evidence, which by definition excludes metaphysics. By the same token,

if direct evidence is found for some phenomenon previously believed to be metaphysical, and that evidence is subsequently validated, then by definition that phenomenon is no longer metaphysical.

As progress is made in efforts to carefully measure subtle and elusive beneficial experiences and capacities in ways that maintain the integrity of those phenomena, a time will come when enough has been achieved that a better description of such a psychology will become possible. Meanwhile, a review of the transpersonal field's empirical literature to date may provide some indications of what lies ahead. Key areas for future focus will include furthering the development of methods and tools that expand the current limits and boundaries of empirical measurement and observation of the types of phenomena that transpersonal psychology has considered (cf. Ferrer, 2014; Friedman & Hartelius, 2021), and that strive to advance the measurement of states of consciousness (e.g., Hartelius, 2020; Hartelius et al., 2022). Given that the transpersonal field has always positioned itself as expansive and exploratory, these areas of development would not exclude ongoing work in philosophy and hermeneutics, discussion of metaphysical issues, or even attempts to reverse-engineer metaphysical accounts back to associated phenomenal experiences and measurable cognitive mechanisms or neural correlates (e.g., Lancaster, 2004).

### **A Transpersonal Psychology Based in Open Scientific Naturalism**

The stakes are whether or not psychology will evolve into a field that can serve the diversities of an emerging world no longer content to aspire to Western beliefs and values. Not every society reaching for technological modernity wishes to leave behind its spirituality or its cultural relationship with dreams or trance or other exceptional states and capacities. Even Western societies are experiencing fundamentalist backlashes against stark modernist values. Through embrace of an open scientific naturalism, transpersonal psychology has the opportunity to leave behind its sometimes anti-scientific impulses and participate in the development of the broader field of psychology (cf. Wade, 2019) as it opens and adapts to serve

the array of human temperaments, identities, and cultures that are the real world.

Transpersonal psychology began as a scientific field pushing against the limitations of the background philosophy implicit in scientific society—a narrow version of materialism rooted in specifically Western culture that marginalizes or pathologizes the very types of human experiences and capacities that have been much of the field's focus. In its early years, papers published in JTP were largely consistent with a science feeling its way toward a more open naturalism—one that welcomed empirical research into a biologically rooted "higher-nature-of-man" (Maslow, as quoted in Sutich, 1976, p. 11). Transpersonal psychology has attended especially to exceptional human experiences (e.g., Sutich, 1969), along with the implications these have for defining the person (Hartelius et al., 2021) and for the shaping of human psychology more broadly (Hartelius, 2016b).

Gradual expansion of this impulse toward an empirical scientific discipline based in open naturalism is reflected in the slow but steady increase in the field's empirical literature, especially since the early 2000s (Hartelius, 2021), as well as developments in theoretical and philosophical discourse. While philosophical questions about metaphysics and the nature of reality will and should continue, the urgencies of human suffering and trauma that run far deeper and wider than stories that reach news headlines, demand that whatever the transpersonal field has to offer psychology be brought forward in the form of practical empirical research as rapidly and as effectively as possible.

### **In This Issue**

This Special Topic Section, focused on Empirical Research in Transpersonal Psychology, begins with a paper by Tadas Stumbrys entitled, *The Luminous Night of the Soul: The Relationship Between Lucid Dreaming and Spirituality*. The study examines the relationship between spirituality and this experience in which a dreamer is aware that they are dreaming. Without implying a causal link, the study found significant positive association between lucid dream frequency and reported spiritual transcendence—a tantalizing link that deserves further study.

A second study, by Miran Lavrič, Snežana Brumec, and Andrej Naterer, focuses on Exceptional Human Experiences Among Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago: A Study of Self-Reported Experiences and Transformative Aftereffects. His online survey of over 500 pilgrims found strong correlations between exceptional experiences while walking the Camino and transformative aftereffects such as enhanced self-confidence and improved relationships. This suggests that practices such as walking pilgrimages can produce lasting positive psychosocial effects.

A research paper by Sonia Romero Martinez, Andrés Dueñas, and Xavier Ordoñez, reports on Effects of Brief Daily Kundalini Yoga Meditation on Self-Esteem, Mood and Emotional Self-Efficacy: A Randomized Comparison Study. Spanish-speaking adults in Spain reported that a short engagement with either of two types of kundalini yoga meditation from the Yogi Bhajan Lineage had positive impacts on multiple dimensions of life.

In the section's final paper, Samuel W. Root provides direction on Using LEGOs® in Research Facilitation: An Advanced Scripted Research Method. This six-step process requires 30 to 60 minutes, and is designed for use in situations such as overcoming impasses in the research process. The method can also be adapted for use in play therapy.

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