

TRANSPERSONAL THEORY

NOW AND THEN

We live in a culture in which spirituality is at best regarded as edifying subjective experiences without real cognitive value about the world. In this chapter, I introduce the project of this book and suggest that the glue of the transpersonal vision is its commitment to the epistemic value of spirituality, that is, the conviction that a complete understanding of reality and human nature needs to include spiritual insights and perspectives. I also offer a personal narrative of the origins of the participatory vision of human spirituality I present in this book.

THIS BOOK IS A REVISION of transpersonal theory from a participatory perspective of knowledge and reality. The revision begins with a critical appraisal of some of the main philosophical foundations of the field, and then introduces an alternative participatory vision to understand and live transpersonal and spiritual phenomena. This book is, then, a deconstruction and a reconstruction of the entire transpersonal project aimed at the articulation of what I believe it is a more sophisticated, pluralistic, and spiritually grounded transpersonal theory.

Part I of the book (Deconstruction) uncovers and challenges three inter-related presuppositions of the conceptual framework prevalent in most transpersonal scholarship so far: *experientialism*, the assumption that transpersonal and spiritual phenomena are fundamentally individual inner experiences;

inner empiricism, the assumption that transpersonal inquiry needs to be empirically grounded; and *perennialism*, the assumption that spiritual knowledge, spiritual liberation, and spiritual ultimates are most basically universal. These beliefs about transpersonal phenomena allude respectively to their nature (intrasubjective experiences), the method and epistemology for their study and justification (empiricist), and the wider metaphysical framework within which they are understood (universalist). One of the main theses of this book is that these assumptions, although once probably inevitable and even salutary, have become today increasingly limiting and problematic, and their value should therefore be restricted to certain aspects or stages of transpersonal inquiry.

Let me briefly introduce here the nature of these problems and some of the directions towards their resolution advanced in Part II of the book (Reconstruction). First, by experientialism I mean the prevalent understanding of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena in terms of individual inner experiences. In questioning this view, I am not denying that there is an intrasubjective dimension in the human participation in these phenomena. Rather, my claim is that this dimension, although important, is not the fundamental one for understanding their nature, and that this kind of transpersonal experientialism is therefore both distorting and reductionistic. What is more, I argue that this experiential understanding not only afflicts transpersonal theory with unnecessary Cartesian anxieties and pseudoproblems, but also has pernicious consequences for the ways in which transpersonal and spiritual phenomena are engaged and integrated in everyday life (chapter 2). On the one hand, experientialism structures these phenomena in terms of a “subject” having experiences of transpersonal or spiritual “objects,” making transpersonal theory vulnerable to the myths of subjectivism and objectivism, the aporias (unresolvable puzzles) of absolutism and relativism, and the riddles of epistemic mediation. On the other hand, spiritual events in which I participate become *my* experiences, and this interpretation effectively paves the way for their egoic and narcissistic appropriation.

As an antidote, I delineate an alternative conceptual framework, a *participatory vision*, which I believe enables us to understand and live transpersonal phenomena more harmoniously with their nature and the aims of spiritual life. Briefly, the kernel of this participatory vision is a *turn from intrasubjective experiences to participatory events in our understanding of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena*. Transpersonal phenomena, I argue, can be more ade-

quately conceived not as individual inner experiences, but as participatory events that can emerge in the locus of an individual, a relationship, a collective identity, or a place. The intrasubjective dimension of transpersonal phenomena, then, should be regarded as the participation of an individual consciousness in a multilocal transpersonal event, and not as their essential nature. This participation engages human beings in the activity I call *participatory knowing*, that is, a multidimensional access to reality that can involve not only the creative power of the mind, but also of the body, the heart, and the soul (chapter 5).

Second, inner empiricism refers to the study of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena through the language, methods, and standards of empiricist science. Central to inner empiricism is the belief that transpersonal and spiritual claims are valid because they can be replicated and tested through disciplined introspection, and can be therefore intersubjectively verified or falsified. In challenging inner empiricism, it is not my intention to devalue the scientific and empirical study of transpersonal experiences, which I consider both important and necessary. In contrast, my claim is that importing scientific standards into transpersonal studies often results in an *empiricist colonization of spirituality* that not only distorts the nature of spiritual inquiry, but also has self-defeating consequences for the contemporary legitimization of spirituality (chapter 3).

What is needed, I claim, is not to burden spirituality with the concerns and demands of empiricist science (replicability, falsifiability, verifiability, etc.), but to discern the logic of spiritual inquiry and establish its own standards of validity. The validity of spiritual knowledge, I argue, has more to do with its emancipatory power for self, relationships, and world (e.g., its capability to free individuals, communities, and societies from egocentric understandings of reality and associated ways of life) than with any particular spiritual referent or picture of reality disclosed (chapter 7). I should say straight off that this aspect of the project is by far the least developed. Although I offer some suggestions throughout these pages about what a logic of and standards of validity for spiritual inquiry may look, a more systematic presentation awaits a future work.

Finally, perennialism refers to the universalistic vision of a common core of spirituality generally assumed and endorsed in transpersonal works. More concretely, by perennialism I mean the view that the various spiritual traditions and insights correspond to different interpretations, dimensions, or levels of a

single spiritual ultimate that is both pregiven and universal. My objections to this view should not be taken as implying that there are no common elements among religious traditions, or that any type of spiritual universalism is necessarily mistaken. Actually, I believe that the search for interreligious parallels is a crucial enterprise, and in the concluding chapter I suggest how a more relaxed, permissive, and fertile universalism can be consistently maintained. However, I do claim that the kind of perennialism presupposed in most transpersonal works is an a priori position that has been uncritically taken for granted, that it is contingent upon questionable Cartesian presuppositions, and that it raises important obstacles for interreligious dialogue and spiritual inquiry. For example, traditions that do not accept the perennialist vision are regarded as inauthentic, lower, or merely “exoteric” (chapter 4).

As a gesture of balance, this work shows that transpersonal theory does not need the perennial philosophy as its foundational metaphysical framework. To this end, I provide a more pluralistic understanding of spiritual knowledge and liberation that seeks not only to free us from the shortcomings of perennialism, but also to better honor the diversity of ways in which the sense of the sacred can be cultivated, embodied, and lived. Roughly, I argue that there are different spiritual liberations (i.e., different ways to overcome limiting self-centeredness and fully participate in the Mystery from which everything arises), and that spiritual traditions cultivate, enact, and express, in interaction with a *dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power*, potentially overlapping but independent spiritual ultimates. Or put in metaphorical terms, the Ocean of Emancipation has many shores (chapter 6). Furthermore, although higher and lower spiritual insights may exist both within and between religious traditions, I claim that these qualitative distinctions need to be elucidated through spiritual inquiry, interreligious dialogue, and the assessment of their emancipatory power for self, community, and world, and not determined from any overarching metaphysical scheme that tells us, in an a priori and doctrinal manner, which insights and traditions are superior or inferior (chapter 7).

Before proceeding further, I should clarify that I do not think that experientialism, inner empiricism, and perennialism are ubiquitous in transpersonal theory. There are important exceptions to these trends and by no means do I want to suggest that every transpersonal author endorses all of them. However, I do believe that these assumptions have strongly configured the basic contours of transpersonal scholarship so far. In other words, my claim is that experientialism, inner empiricism, and perennialism have been

the prevalent interpretive lenses for the study of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena since the very birth of the field. Although I offer no comprehensive review of the literature to substantiate this claim, I refer to a number of influential transpersonal works throughout the book, and direct the reader to extra references in the footnotes when necessary. In proceeding this way, I am assuming that readers acquainted with the transpersonal literature will easily recognize the pervasiveness of these assumptions in the field, so that we can move to the more fruitful and challenging task of analyzing their pitfalls and suggesting some tentative solutions.

But before starting this analysis, and in order to offer some very general coordinates for the present inquiry, it may be helpful to briefly introduce here the historical origins, spiritual import, and epistemological challenge of the transpersonal vision. To conclude this chapter, then, I offer some reflections on the personal roots of the participatory vision introduced in this book.

THE BIRTH OF THE TRANSPERSONAL MOVEMENT

Transpersonal theory is concerned with the study of the transpersonal and spiritual dimensions of human nature and existence. Etymologically, the term *transpersonal* means beyond or through (trans-) the personal, and is generally used in the transpersonal literature to reflect concerns, motivations, experiences, developmental stages (cognitive, moral, emotional, interpersonal, etc.), modes of being, and other phenomena that include but transcend the sphere of the individual personality, self, or ego.¹

The historical origins of the transpersonal orientation have been eloquently narrated elsewhere and need not be repeated here (see Sutich, 1969, 1976; Vich, 1990; Walsh, 1993a). Suffice it to say that the transpersonal orientation originated in the mid-1960s out of the interest of a group of psychologists and psychiatrists (Anthony Sutich, Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Miles Vich, etc.) in expanding the field of humanistic psychology beyond its focus on the individual self and towards the creation of “a still ‘higher’ Fourth Psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interests, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like” (Maslow, 1968, pp. iii–iv).

Historically, the transpersonal orientation emerged out of the encounter between Western psychology—psychoanalytic, Jungian, humanistic, and existentialist schools in particular—Eastern contemplative traditions—especially Zen, Advaita Vedanta, and Taoism—and the psychedelic counterculture of

California in the 1960s. The roots of the transpersonal perspective in the Western psychological tradition can be traced to Brentano's psychology of consciousness and emphasis on lived experience; William James's radical empiricism and studies in mysticism; Freud's formulation of the unconscious and concern with the oceanic feeling and evenly suspended attention; Jung's notions of the collective unconscious, the archetypes, and the individuation process, as well as his studies in Asian religions and Western esoteric traditions; Fromm's interest in Zen Buddhism and Vedanta; Assagioli's psychosynthesis; Maslow's studies on metamotivations, peak-experiences, and self-actualization; and Grof's pioneering psychedelic research.² The transpersonal perspective also finds precedents in Western philosophies such as Plato's metaphysics, contemplative ideals, and theory of recollection (*anamnesis*); Husserl's transcendental phenomenology; Hegel's dialectic of Spirit; nineteenth century European Romanticism; American Transcendentalism; Heidegger's inquiries into Being; and a plethora of spiritual traditions such as Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Christian mysticism, Kabbalah, and the various schools usually amalgamated under the name of Western esotericism.³

The Eastern influence upon the nascent transpersonal movement came mainly by the hand of thinkers such as D. T. Suzuki, who popularized Zen philosophy in the West; Alan Watts, whose interpretation of Taoist, Buddhist, and Hindu thinking had a major impact on the counterculture of the 1960s; and Haridas Chaudhuri, who brought to America the integral vision of the Neo-Hindu mystic Sri-Aurobindo. Other Hindu influences include Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Bagwan Rajneesh, Paramahansa Yogananda, and Swami Mutkananda. Another important catalyst of the transpersonal movement was the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism to the West by teachers such as Chögyam Trungpa, founder of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, or Tarthang Tulku, prime mover of the translation of numerous Tibetan works into English. Somewhat later, transpersonalism was strongly influenced by the Theravada *vipassana* movement, originally extended to America by Western teachers trained in South Asia such as Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein.⁴ The coming to the West of these and other Eastern traditions, together with the interest in consciousness and altered states triggered by the widespread use of psychedelics, paved the way for the birth of the transpersonal movement in the California of the late 1960s.

THE SPIRITUAL IMPORT OF THE TRANSPERSONAL VISION

Although a strict correspondence between transpersonality and spirituality cannot be maintained, the study of transpersonal phenomena led most authors to delve into the spiritual depths of human existence.⁵ Actually, the focus on the experiential and cognitive dimensions of spirituality is one of the main factors that distinguishes transpersonal theory from most other scientific and humanistic disciplines.

Transpersonal theory, however, is not merely another academic discipline. The transpersonal vision is a way of thinking *and* living self, other, and world that can be *diversely* manifested not only in transpersonal states, but also in relationships, community, society, ethics, education, politics, philosophy, religion, cosmology, and almost any other area of human thinking, feeling, and action.⁶ Transpersonal theory, that is, can shed new light and transform virtually any phenomenon in which human beings participate. When I say that the transpersonal vision can transform the world, I am not talking in poetic or metaphoric terms. What I am suggesting is that the final intention of any genuine transpersonal vision is not the elaboration of theoretical models to understand transpersonal phenomena, but to midwife an intersubjectively shared reality, a transpersonal reality. The ultimate aim of the transpersonal vision is to bring forth a transpersonal world.⁷

When I talk of transpersonal theory as a vision, I do not mean to suggest that there is a unified transpersonal paradigm. There is not. Disagreements among transpersonalists are the norm rather than the exception. And these divergences are not merely about minor theoretical issues, but often about the central philosophical and metaphysical foundations of the field, for example, the understanding of transpersonal phenomena, the meaning of spirituality, or the very nature of reality (e.g., see Funk, 1994; Rothberg & Kelly, 1998). The lack of consensus on fundamental matters in the transpersonal movement is so pronounced that rather than talk about a transpersonal paradigm, it may be more accurate to talk about different transpersonal paradigms under the roof of one transpersonal vision.

But, what then is the unifying tissue of the transpersonal vision? Ever since its inception, transpersonal theory has given spirituality a central place in our understanding of human nature and the cosmos (Sutich, 1969). Transpersonal theorists have typically regarded Spirit not only as the essence of human nature, but also as the ground, pull, and goal of cosmic evolution. In

spite of its internal divergences, then, I believe that it is still possible to distinguish the transpersonal vision from other world views by its conviction that a comprehensive understanding of human beings and the cosmos requires the inclusion of spiritual phenomena. The conviction that, as William James (1902/1961) puts it in allusion to mystical states, “no account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded” (p. 305). As I elaborate below, the different transpersonal paradigms converge in their commitment to the epistemic import of spirituality.

THE TRANSPERSONAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

Particularly relevant for our present inquiry is the assertion, common in the transpersonal literature, that both the source and justification of spiritual claims should be sought in the intrasubjective experiential dimension of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena. Put somewhat differently, transpersonal knowledge claims have been generally understood and justified within an inner empiricist framework. This intrasubjective empiricism is one of the main targets of this book. As I mentioned above, I believe that this account has formidable conceptual and practical problems that ultimately sabotage the transpersonal perspective from within. Later on I will explore in some detail both the nature of these shortcomings and how they can be overcome through a participatory turn in our understanding of transpersonal phenomena. Here, in order to highlight the heart of the transpersonal challenge to the modern world view, I would like to portray the transpersonal vision not in experiential, but in epistemic terms.

Although with different emphases, every transpersonal theorist has maintained that transpersonal and spiritual phenomena provide important and valid knowledge about human beings and the world. This commitment situates the transpersonal vision in sharp contrast with scientific, materialist, positivist, analytical, and reductionistic paradigms, which have consistently regarded spirituality as wishful thinking, infantile illusions, mere ideology, psychotic hallucinations, pseudoscience, language games with no reference to the real world, or, at best, edifying private, subjective experiences without public, objective cognitive value.⁸ The thread common to all these approaches is their assessment of spirituality as epistemologically sterile. Spiritual and transpersonal phenomena, we are told, do not provide any form of valid, reliable, or real knowledge about human beings or the world. The transpersonal vision, in contrast, holds that transpersonal and spiritual phenomena do have

epistemic value. And this conviction is, I believe, the unifying glue that connects the different transpersonal paradigms: The unifying feature of the transpersonal vision is its commitment to the epistemic value of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena.

THE ORIGINS OF THE PARTICIPATORY VISION

It was several years ago that I became aware of the centrality of knowledge in transpersonal studies. The epistemic dimension of transpersonal phenomena seemed to me fundamental for understanding their nature and emancipatory power: What makes transpersonal phenomena distinctly “transpersonal” (as well as interesting, provocative, and transforming) is not their nonordinary or occasional ecstatic character, but the character of the knowledge they provide during an expansion of individual consciousness.

Despite the centrality of knowledge in transpersonal phenomena, discussions about its nature and justification were virtually absent in the literature. And with a few exceptions, the discussions I found struck me as unsatisfactory. On the one hand, there was much confusion about the epistemological framework within which transpersonal knowledge claims were to be understood and evaluated. The lack of criteria for determining what could be considered valid transpersonal knowledge was rendering transpersonal theory a free-for-all open to any form of metaphysical speculation. On the other hand, most transpersonal authors were working upon unexamined and outdated objectivist epistemological assumptions which, I gradually came to see, severely undermined the very transpersonal orientation they championed.

What is more, this conceptual confusion regarding the nature of transpersonal knowledge had practical ramifications in the transpersonal community. In some of the transpersonal circles with which I was acquainted, for example, I often witnessed the pronouncement of strong knowledge claims about the ultimate nature of the self and the world—about “things as they really are”—on the basis of the transpersonal experiences some very thoughtful and well-intended individuals had gone through. Two elements were particularly striking about these claims: The first was the uncritical, and sometimes dogmatic, tone that usually accompanied them. When challenged with the epistemic duty of justifying such claims, for example, the empirical—meaning here experiential—nature of this knowledge was frequently purported as the unquestionable evidence for their objective validity or even status as universal truths. The second was the many contradictions existing

between the different transpersonal revelations. It was simply fascinating to notice how modern Western individuals appeared to be accessing spiritual insights belonging to a rich variety of traditional cosmologies. Over and over again, I witnessed with perplexity how the clash between different religious world views was coming alive in the transpersonal community. In the middle of such turmoil, of course, the temptations to fall into one or another form of perennialism to honor all those truths were tremendous. For the reasons that I expound in this book, however, I could not find the seductions of the perennialist vision either alluring or satisfying.

After years of study, dialogue, and spiritual inquiry, I resolved that this nebulousness around the nature of transpersonal knowledge was deeply detrimental for the legitimization of spirituality in academic and social milieus, a legitimization that was sorely needed. Transpersonal theory lacked an adequate epistemology, and the consequences were disastrous.

This realization led me to focus my research initially on the study of the nature and justification of transpersonal knowledge. The regulative goal of my original project was the development of a transpersonal epistemology, that is, an epistemological framework that would provide (1) an understanding of the nature and possibilities of transpersonal knowledge (descriptive component), and (2) criteria for the acceptance and rejection of transpersonal knowledge claims (normative component). By that time, I defined transpersonal knowledge as the knowledge claimed to be accessed during transpersonal experiences, and my general plan was to analyze the nature of this knowledge along four interrelated axes: Objective/constructed, immediate/mediate, universal/contextual, and absolute/relative. To this end, I would rely on several bodies of knowledge, with particular emphasis on the field of comparative mysticism, the epistemologies of several contemplative traditions, the literature on interreligious dialogue, and relevant works on contemporary Western epistemology, philosophy of science, and religious epistemology. My hope was that these interdisciplinary explorations would illuminate the way transpersonal knowledge claims had to be understood, and suggest adequate guidelines for their justification.

Although I frankly believed in the relevance of searching for a transpersonal epistemology, a vague but insidious feeling of dissatisfaction with the project soon grew in me. At first, I thought that its source was the very ambitious nature of the project and the associated self-doubts about my knowledge and skill to undertake it successfully. As my discontent increased, however, I

began to consider the possibility that its roots were somewhere else. Whatever the source of this feeling, it was undermining most of my creative efforts. The more I struggled to develop my thinking along the lines envisioned in my original project, the more stuck and frustrated I felt. This feeling of dissatisfaction culminated in a period of intellectual stagnation in which I could not write directly on the project for almost a year. Painfully aware of my inability to advance the research in any satisfactory way, I decided to set it aside for some time and focus my energies on other projects. During this time, however, the project was continuously present in the back of my mind—sometimes as if it were mischievously mocking me!

Looking in part for a deeper understanding of this intellectual impasse, I explored my thoughts, feelings, and sensations around the subject during meditation and while in different states of expanded awareness. At some point during this inquiry, I started to suspect that there was “something” terribly wrong in the very nature of the project. As I looked more deeply, the real face of my frustration showed itself in my consciousness. My discontent was not rooted in lacking the answers to my questions, but in the very questions I was asking. Joanna Macy once said that “if we were lucky enough, we would find the right question, rather than the right answer” (Macy & Rothberg, 1994, p. 25). How I appreciated this insight at that time!

As I see it now, standard questions about knowledge claims and epistemic justification are associated with modes of discourse characteristic of the Cartesian ego. On the one hand, I realized, these epistemological concerns were parasitic of a Cartesian model of knowledge concerned with explaining and justifying the gap between subject and object. On the other hand, I repeatedly observed, these problems collapsed when approached through contemplative modes of cognition. Issues of epistemic normativity, that is, strike me now as contingent on Cartesian modes of consciousness. In light of this new awareness, I reconsidered the direction of my efforts, and decided to let go of the normative aims of my research—if not of the entire project itself. And yet, a deeper voice was whispering to me, gently but breathlessly, that there was still something truly crucial in exploring the epistemic dimension of transpersonal experiences.

An important shift of direction in my research occurred when, unsatisfied with the current definitions of transpersonal experience, I tried to elaborate my own. It was then when I became aware not only of the difficulties of defining transpersonal phenomena as individual inner experiences, but

also of the serious conceptual and practical limitations of such experiential understanding.⁹ Clearly, if I wanted to make any substantial advance in my inquiries into transpersonal knowledge, I had to start from scratch and find a different voice to talk about transpersonal phenomena. To my surprise, I then realized that this alternative voice, although dormant, had been present in my project ever since my early insight into the centrality of knowledge in transpersonal phenomena: Transpersonal phenomena, I thought, are not individual inner experiences, but epistemic events.

This epistemic approach, as I called it, essentially proposed the need for an epistemic turn, a radical shift from experience to knowledge in our understanding of human spirituality that would free transpersonal studies from their limiting Cartesian moorings. The epistemic turn led the way out of Cartesianism, as well as from its associated epistemological dilemmas, by conceiving human spirituality not as intrasubjective experiences, but as multilocal epistemic events that can emerge not only in the locus of an individual, but also in a relationship, a community, a collective identity, or a place.¹⁰

The final turn in my exploration happened when I realized that the distinction between experiential and epistemic I had pragmatically constructed to free transpersonal studies from Cartesianism was ultimately artificial and arbitrary.¹¹ Since both experience and knowledge can be conceptualized in Cartesian and non-Cartesian terms, it became gradually obvious that the revision I was proposing could be more accurately conveyed not so much in terms of an epistemic turn, a shift from experience to knowledge, but of a participatory turn, a shift from intrasubjective experiences to participatory events which can be equally understood in both experiential and epistemic terms. Human participation in transpersonal and spiritual phenomena is a creative, multidimensional event that can involve every aspect of human nature, from somatic transfiguration to the awakening of the heart, from erotic communion to visionary cocreation, and from contemplative knowing to moral insight.¹²

This book tells the story of where this insight has led me so far.