

# In the Spirit of Hermes

## Reflections on the Work of Jorge N. Ferrer

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■ *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality*, by Jorge Ferrer. SUNY, 2002.

Occasionally a book appears that signals an important turn in the road of a particular method. More often than not, such a turn is not immediately recognized by those on the road. Indeed, even if they do recognize it, they will often passionately, perhaps even violently, resist it. Paradigm shifts, as we have come to call them, seldom happen without a good deal of stress and suffering, and human beings are notoriously bad at dealing with deep structural change, particularly when that change involves their deepest religious and ontological commitments. Any radical challenge, in other words, is just that: *radical*, "to the root." And who wants to be uprooted?

I certainly possess no developed precognitive abilities, but as a deeply interested albeit somewhat distant and random reader of transpersonal literature, I cannot help but think that Jorge Ferrer's recent book, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (SUNY, 2002) is a good candidate for signaling—if not actually helping effect—just such a radical "turn" in transpersonal theory, that broad range of contemporary writing that seeks to synthesize modern psychology and traditional mystical

literature through an affirmation of the theoretical importance of those human experiences that lie beyond the realm of the conscious ego or person.

I write here under the sign of Hermes, that mercurial (occasionally phallic) figure of Greek and Roman mythology, Western hermeticism, alchemy, and esotericism who does not appear in Ferrer's writing as such but who is central to my own thought as the largely unacknowledged patron of hermeneutics, that "Hermes process" or practice that mystically fuses horizons of the past and present in order to envision new futures of religious meaning and human flourishing. Constructed anew within the contemporary practice of hermeneutics, Hermes can teach us that, although we certainly cannot live according to our religious pasts (as premodern totalizing systems, they are all far too intolerant and violent for that), neither can we live without them: only intelligent, radically critical, and deeply committed fusions of our pasts and presents can offer us any real and lasting hope.

Jorge Ferrer takes us a very long way down this hermeneutical road without exactly calling it that. In what follows I want to show how he does this, why I think his thought is so important, and where I think we can further extend, deepen, and radicalize it.

### *The Deconstruction*

Ferrer's book is simply structured around the two movements of

deconstruction and reconstruction, because he believes that any adequate future spiritualities (and the plural is significant) can arise only after *all* previous forms of spirituality have passed through the apophatic fires of modern and postmodern thought. Ferrer is neither exactly a modern nor, much less, a postmodern in his thinking, but he is clear that both forms of consciousness must be met and struggled with on their own terms before any real transpersonal progress can be made. Ferrer's book is based on a triple critique of contemporary spiritualities that revolves around three central pillars of modern transpersonal theory: experientialism, empiricism, and perennialism.

*Experientialism* refers to that tendency in modern religious thought to locate meaning and authority in the subjective experiences of individuals, a conviction perhaps most commonly heard today in the phrase "I am spiritual but not religious." Ferrer, as we will soon see, thinks that, ontologically speaking, we are far more intimately and creatively involved with both tradition and the "outside" world than this modern individualism assumes.

*Empiricism* is that related move designed to establish subjective religious experience as somehow scientific, that is, as replicable, verifiable, and falsifiable. Hence, we often hear about the "science of yoga" or the innumerable psychological and physiological studies of meditation that have scientifically established its many remarkable benefits. Much of this, of course, is quite legitimate in its own right and often utterly fascinating, but

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Ferrer worries out loud about the deeper, underlying logic of the move, the logic that relies on empiricist standards to grant a human experience the status of truth or reality.

By the middle of the twentieth century, this psychologized, often scientific discourse had developed into a well-formed, more or less conscious essentialism that saw as its goal the recovery of a *perennialism* or perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis*), the position that all "true" or "genuine" mystics have always (perennially) arrived at the same set of metaphysical truths. Interestingly, perennialism usually has been expressed in abstract monistic or nondual terms that are nevertheless distinctly indebted to a very, very small number of religious traditions, with some form of Sufism, Advaita Vedanta, or (mostly Mahayana or Vajrayana) Buddhism the most commonly cited.

Ferrer believes that experientialism, inner empiricism and perennialism are all intimately connected to what he calls the Cartesian ego and its attending subject-object dualisms, that is, to the epistemological foundations of modernity itself. They all work out of what Ferrer calls the "Myth of the Given" that sees reality as something objective "out there" that can be accessed by any suitably equipped knower. Experientialism, empiricism, and perennialism, in other words, for whatever else they are, are fundamental products of a reified sense of self that is locked into a radically and ultimately false dualistic epistemology. As such, they ironically prescribe the metaphysical cause of modern spiritual malaise (that is, a kind of disenchanting dualism) for its cure. In the process, they fail almost completely to take seriously the often irreconcilable differences that exist between the different contemplative traditions and their stated (and quite often intolerant) ontological goals.

One of my favorite parts of the book is a simple thought experiment Ferrer proposes. A hypothetical Theravada

Buddhist meditator reports experiences either of an indestructible, eternal Self (the goal of Advaita Vedanta) or the dynamic presence of a good and loving God (the goal of theistic contemplation):

Will these "experiential data" be taken as falsifying or refuting the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*anatman*)? Will the teacher even consider that doctrine's potential fallibility? Hardly so. As any Buddhist practitioner well knows, these data will be regarded as an obvious sign of delusion, wrong view, attachment to permanent existence, or even of egoic resistance. And you will probably be told by your teacher, with more or less gentleness, to go back to your meditation cushion and keep practicing until you overcome delusion and see "things as they really are," that is, marked by no-self and impermanence as the Theravada canons maintain.

It is, in other words, quite naïve to suppose that a particular religious worldview can ever be proven wrong by the "direct" spiritual experiences produced by that very worldview. Generally speaking, religious systems simply will not allow any competing experiences, however profound or deeply felt, to challenge the authority of the tradition, and the experiences that they produce tend strongly to support the system that produced them.

Ferrer also points out—again quite correctly—that experientialism, empiricism and perennialism all are hopelessly ahistorical moves and as such operate out of an impoverished perspective on the history of religions. Ferrer notes, for example, that such scholars as Wilhelm Halbfass and Robert Sharf have eloquently argued that premodern forms of Hinduism and Buddhism generally knew no such radical emphasis on "personal experience" as the ultimate arbiter of religious truth. Quite the contrary, both broad traditions favored scriptural authority and tradition over personal experience, did not hesitate to attack (often quite violently) competing

interpretations of scriptural authorities, and did not in fact turn to the discourse of personal experience as it stands now until their colonial contact with the West in the modern period. "Personal experience," in other words, is a quintessentially Western and modern move, more reflective of Western individualism and, eventually, democratic forms of social practice than anything we find in the Asian traditions.

Finally, experientialism, inner empiricism, and perennialism are often quite naïve about what constitutes the scientific method and religious practice. After a sophisticated review of the philosophy of science, Ferrer points out that "in any contemplative community, no single spiritual experience will count as falsifying evidence against the sacred knowledge of their tradition ... what in one tradition is seen as a crucial spiritual insight, in another can be regarded as the most deceptive of delusions." It thus seems clear that "spiritual claims can be corroborated, but not falsified. And the validity of this corroboration is not universal or absolute (as it is traditionally claimed) but contextual and relative." I can only applaud such an observation and radicalize it further. Spiritual experiences, after all, are not technically replicable either, at least in the precise sense that the scientific method demands, that is, in the sense of controlling all but one tested variable. How could such a thing ever be possible with something as delicate and idiosyncratic as human religious experience? Every human being, after all, is the expression of literally *billions* of historical, psychological, physiological, cellular, and genetic events, none of which are exactly the same in any two people; indeed, even two identical twins (that is, clones) are irreducibly different by virtue of their individual life experiences. How, then, could we ever know which of these billions of ever-changing variables (from DNA to religious belief to this morning's news) contributed to, much less determined, the event of a religious experience?

Clearly, we are not in the limited realm of the natural sciences here.

### *The Reconstruction*

Following in a long line of hermeneutical thinkers, from Wilhelm Dilthey to Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ferrer argues that the assimilation of all human knowledge and experience to the standards of validity of the hard sciences is a tragedy and, ultimately, a dysfunctional epistemological move. On a humorous note, I am reminded here of something I witnessed in graduate school that annoyed me to no end: It was a T-shirt that bore the caption "Harvard: The University of Chicago of the East" (I'll leave it to my readers to figure out where I saw it). What ruffled me so was what I would call its ideological dysfunctionality: in its very attempt to establish Chicago over Harvard, it suggested in fact the exact opposite, namely, that Harvard was the perceived gold standard of research universities. We are in a very similar position, I think, with phrases like the "science of religious experience." The intentions are no doubt good ones and the pay-offs real, but the message is, at best, a double, if not self-defeating, one.

It is much better, Ferrer suggests, to recognize that religious traditions are more fruitfully approached and understood with a set of methods more attuned to their internal dynamics and nature. Accordingly, Ferrer, quoting Hendrik Vroom, suggests that religions are not verifiable or falsifiable sets of data but "living hermeneutic processes." In Ferrer's own words, "Most artistic, social, and spiritual endeavors are aimed not so much at describing human nature and the world, but at engaging them in creative, participatory and transformative ways, and therefore have different goals, methods, and standards of validity." In Gadamerian terms, truth in the humanities is not so much a correspondence with ahistorical facts but "an event of self-disclosure of Being," an ontological happening "in the locus

of human historical existence."

Which is not to say that they are only about the human. Indeed, central to Ferrer's hermeneutical turn in the transpersonal road is what he calls the Mystery of Being and something he calls "participatory events," the latter which he defines as "*emergences of transpersonal being that can occur not only in the locus of an individual, but also in a relationship, a community, a collective identity or a place.*" Such events can and do elicit "personal experiences" in individuals who participate in them, but such events cannot be reduced to human subjectivity or be understood as localized solely within a human being. Not unlike a party (Ferrer's own lovely analogy) in which a collection of seeming individuals suddenly find themselves coalescing into a larger happy something, participatory events emerge within relational, intimate, and often celebratory contexts that are literally "transpersonal" (that is, beyond the person) and radically interpretive. Being reveals itself in and as the human, understood here not as a disembodied or dissociated spirit or soul but as a fully embodied, integral human being in all his or her emotional, intellectual, sexual, and social dimensions. In itself, Being exists as a "dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power" or Mystery that awaits human interaction for it to be expressed. Being is literally interpreted into being. And, of course, the beer helps.

One of the most powerful and positive consequences of this model is its ability to account for and appreciate what Gadamer called "historical prejudice" and what Ferrer calls mediation, that is, those specific historical forms of consciousness and "bias" that allow different human beings to see very different truths in the same set of traditional practices or texts. In Ferrer's words, "*mediation is transformed from being an obstacle into the very means that enable us to directly participate in the self-disclosure of the world.*" It is indeed excessively odd

why a modern writer's perspective is so often dismissed or even demonized as "relative" or "Western" or whatever, as if the curves and shapes of our mental lenses could only distort and blind. Are not lenses also curved to enable sight, to focus, magnify, and grant new vision? Who is to say that our modern perspectives, those unique curves and shapes of the Western mind, do not also see something more and further? Clearly, they do not see everything, but this does not mean that they see nothing.

### *Radicalizing the Reconstruction*

Ferrer's participatory vision and its turn from subjective "experience" to processual "event" possesses some fairly radical political implications. Within it, a perennialist hierarchical monarchy (the "rule of the One" through the "great chain of Being") that locates all real truth in the feudal past (or, at the very least, in some present hierarchical culture) has been superseded by a quite radical participatory democracy in which the Real reveals itself not in the Great Man, Perfect Saint or God-King (or the Perennialist Scholar) but in radical relation and the sacred present. Consequently, the religious life is not about returning to some golden age of scripture or metaphysical absolute; it is about co-creating new revelations in the present, always, of course, in critical interaction with the past. Such a practice is dynamic, uncertain, and yet hopeful—a *tikkun*-like theurgical healing of the world and of God.

It will come to no reader's surprise at this point in the essay that I find Ferrer's project to be immensely positive. I certainly have my reservations and criticisms, but they all boil down to "wanting more": that is, I would only want to radicalize the participatory vision further by pushing it beyond what I would call its lingering moral perennialism. As I have argued at some length elsewhere, it is a peculiar feature of the modern discourse on

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mysticism that even writers who reject an ontological perennialism ("All true mystics are experiencing the same metaphysical truth") often slip back into an assumption, either implied or explicitly stated, that the mystical traditions are somehow essentially moral ("All true mysticism makes human beings better people"). Ferrer rejects ontological perennialism (again, Being is a dynamic, indeterminate power or Mystery, not an objective ontological structure), but he too ultimately adopts a very positive assessment of the traditions' ethical status, suggesting in effect that the religions have been more successful in finding common moral ground than doctrinal or metaphysical agreement, and that most traditions have called for (if never faithfully or fully enacted) a transcendence of dualistic self-centeredness or narcissism. It is here that I must become suspicious.

Though Ferrer himself is refreshingly free of this particular logic (it is really more of a rhetoric), it is quite easy and quite common in the transpersonal literature to argue for the essential moral nature of mystical experience by being very careful about whom one bestows the (quite modern) title "mystic." It is an entirely circular argument, of course: One simply declares (because one believes) that mysticism is moral, then one lists from literally tens of thousands (millions?) of possible recorded cases a few, maybe a few dozen, exemplars who happen to fit one's moral standards (or better, whose historical description is sketchy enough to hide any and all evidence that would frustrate those standards), and, voilà, one has "proven" that mysticism is indeed moral. Any charismatic figure or saint that violates one's norms—and there will always be a very large, loudly screaming crowd here—one simply labels "not really a mystic" or conveniently ignores altogether. Put differently, it is the constructed category of "mysticism" itself that mutually constructs a "moral mysticism," not the historical evidence,

which is always and everywhere immeasurably more ambivalent.

Ferrer, as is evident in such moments as his thought experiment with the Theravada retreat, sees right through most of this. He knows perfectly well that perennialism simply does not correspond to the historical data. What he does not perhaps see so clearly is that a moral perennialism sneaks through the back door of his own conclusions. Thus, whereas he rightly rejects all talk of a "common core," he can nevertheless speak of a common "Ocean of Emancipation" that all the contemplative traditions approach from their different ontological shores. Happily, there is also much to counter this moral perennialism. He proposes, for example, as a basic criterion by which we should judge the traditions, the moral ability to transcend egoic subjectivity and narcissistic preoccupation with the self for the sake of a larger participation with the Mystery of Being, the world, and other human beings. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, he proposes a second crucial criterion by which we might evaluate the mystical forms of the past, something he calls the dissociation test. With this latter criterion, Ferrer argues that we must realize that our goal can never be simply the recovery or reproduction of some past sense of the sacred, for "we cannot ignore that most religious traditions are still beset not only by intolerant exclusivist and absolutist tendencies, but also by patriarchy, authoritarianism, dogmatism, conservatism, transcendentalism, body-denial, sexual repression, and hierarchical institutions." Put simply, the contemplative traditions of the past have too often functioned as elaborate and sacralized techniques for dissociating consciousness.

Once again, I think this is exactly where we need to be, with a privileging of the ethical over the mystical and an insistence on human wholeness as human holiness. I would only want to further radicalize Ferrer's vision by underscoring how hermeneutical it is,

that is, how it functions as a creative re-visioning and reforming of the past instead of as a simple reproduction of or fundamentalist fantasy about some nonexistent golden age. Put differently, in my view, *there is no shared Ocean of Emancipation in the history of religions*. Indeed, from many of our own modern perspectives, the waters of the past are barely potable, as what most of the contemplative traditions have meant by "emancipation" or "salvation" is not at all what we would like to imply by those terms today. It is, after all, frightfully easy to be emancipated from "the world" or to become one with a deity or ontological absolute and leave all the world's grossly unjust social structures and practices (racism, gender injustice, homophobia, religious bigotry, colonialism, caste, class division, environmental degradation, etc.) comfortably in place.

Metaphysically speaking, how exactly is one to work for human rights or the integrity of historical individuals when one believes that individuals are fundamentally parts of a greater Whole or, more radically, do not in fact exist in any independent fashion? Monism or nondualism (call it what you like) might be convincing ontology, but it's often a disastrous political philosophy. Not that Western monotheism is necessarily any better. God only knows how many human beings have been subtly or brutally denied their individual cultures, bodies, and deepest desires, not to mention their very lives, "for the one God." Once again, oneness can be a terrible thing.

Certainly we can and should work toward a moral mysticism or spirituality of resistance today, but we can do this successfully only after we realize that this is our present participatory task, not some accomplishment we can find in our pasts. It is here, in what we might call the future of the past, that I find Ferrer's participatory vision to be of immense value and real hope. Perhaps this is because it is also only in this same future of the past that I can bear to live at all anymore. □