In the Spirit of Hermes

Reflections on the Work of Jorge N. Ferrer

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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 pre-cognitive 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 mysteriously 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 totality 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 apophasic 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
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 dysfunctionalism: 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 payoffs 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 artifical, 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." 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 tikkan-like theological 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