

From Transpersonalism to Transcendentalism

Historical and Philosophical Reflections

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This brief essay issues from the widely held assumption that contemporary western thought, particularly in North America and western Europe, is slowly but definitely moving toward the creation of a new paradigm—a new set of dominant assumptions. These assumptions will replace the Newtonian-mechanistic-materialistic worldview which has dominated western thought since the seventeenth century, and in time—whether decades or a century or more—will become so fundamental that they too will serve as the unconscious presuppositions for all subsequent thought and cultural expression. I take as the formative expression of this emerging paradigm the writings of Ken Wilber and Stanislav Grof written a decade ago.

In the epilogue to *Eye to Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm*, Wilber notes that “the possibility of a genuinely comprehensive paradigm is an alluring notion,” and that this book “has presented no more than a few fragments of what such a paradigm might look like” (p. 309). It is worth trying to honor Wilber’s attempt to leave the reader with “hints” on how to reach a view of what a new paradigm might look like. Wilber continues:

Not a final knowledge, but a balance in the quest itself; that the only constant is the search; that Being, as Hegel said, is simply the process of its own becoming. When a famous Zen master was asked the meaning and nature of absolute reality, he replied only: “Walk on.”

We are now in a position to explore the characteristics and significance of transpersonalism and to follow on paths which

Wilber and others have cleared in advance. We also have the opportunity to introduce the teachings of other great explorers of the interior who have hitherto been ignored and which, I believe, will prove helpful as we “walk on.” It is one of the charms, and complexities of transpersonalism that this simple expression, “walk on,” has a quite different meaning for the Zen master than it does for the Hegelian—and for myself. For the Zen master, walking is an opportunity to practice stillness in motion; for the Hegelian, “walk on” connotes the absolute unfolding or manifesting in the particular; in the writings of Wilber and transpersonalism generally, “walk on” invites a delicate balance of intuition and analysis, consciousness of the past and future mixed in the present, and a host of subtleties concerning the ways and extent to which “on” connotes forward and an advance. My own assumption is that the emerging paradigm, of which transpersonalism is one of the sure positive indicators, does represent an advance, and we should do what we can to help guarantee its realization by honest and courageous exploration.

For transpersonalism to be understood by both its critics and its exponents, it will need to be defined in relation to the family resemblances it shares with traditional and contemporary like-minded worldviews. Aristotle teaches that a definition must include an account of the edges as well as the essential; to define is to delimit. In the case of transpersonalism, we need first to find its core, and then to find its edges in

relation to humanistic psychology, Asian psychologies, spiritual philosophies such as Vedanta, yoga, Taoism, or newly appreciated teachings such as shamanism. To describe or to characterize a multidisciplinary perspective necessarily lands us in a consideration of presuppositions and underlying principles—in short, in philosophy.

Since psychology separated from its philosophical moorings at the end of the nineteenth century, virtually all psychological schools and movements have made enormous philosophical assumptions. Transpersonal psychology is no exception. Wilber’s *Beyond Ego: Transpersonal Dimensions in Psychology* (1980) and the standard anthology of transpersonalist writings (Walsh and Vaughan, eds., *Beyond Ego*, 1981), assume positions (and exclude others) concerning the nature of the cosmos, society and the individual; the reality of spirit and soul (or psyche); varieties of transformative experience and alternate ways of knowing; and images of the human being which stand behind their diverse conceptions of human wellness.

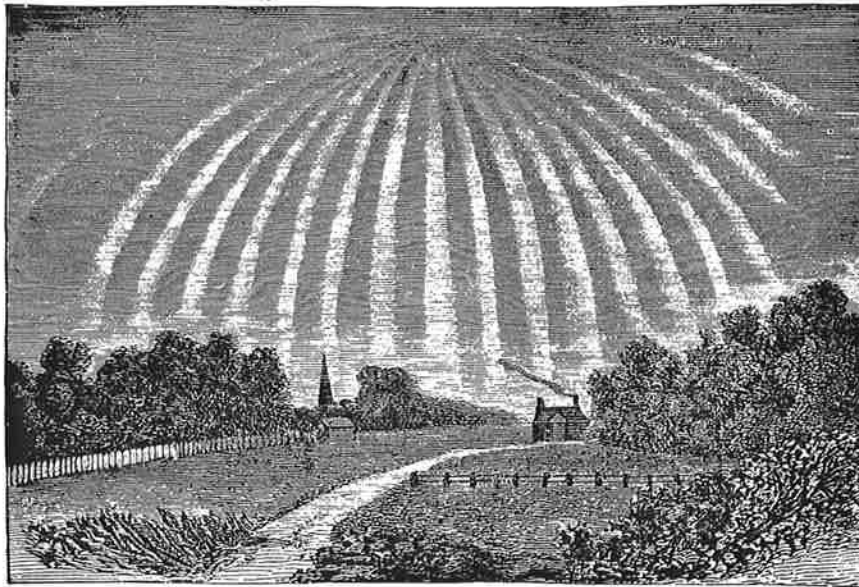
Transpersonalism originated recently and modestly—in fact, from the collaborative efforts of a small group of psychologists in the San Francisco Bay Area who wanted to distinguish their psychological theories and practices from humanistic psychology. Transpersonal psychologists lived happily in the community of humanistic psychology for approximately two decades until they began to focus less on what they held in common with the human-

istic worldview—a need to break the hold of a dehumanizing reductionism—and more on all that remains omitted from various humanistic worldviews. From many sides came reports of experiences, therapies and sources of insight which collectively affirmed realities far beyond the ordinary conception of human experience. Without needing to reject what is affirmed in the humanistic perspective, the transpersonalist tends to emphasize the extraordinary, the “trans,” whether with respect to the intimacy of the relation between the individual and the cosmos, or altered states of consciousness, or the relevance of mystical and shamanic disciplines.

“Humanistic” with respect to psychology and philosophy is no mere tautology: it stands against the various shrunken conceptions of human experience of the dominant paradigm. This broadly characteristic, and frequently emphatic, opposition to a closed and unrevealing universe suggests that it is the “trans” more than “personal” which is the operative component of “transpersonal.” We might wonder why “personal” was chosen at all: why not, for example, “trans-human” as a way of signaling the unrestricted range of experience and reality to which the human being has access—though not particularly as person, or as personal.

Writings by the most influential transpersonal thinkers—Ken Wilber, Stanislav Grof, Richard Tarnas, Frances Vaughan and Roger Walsh—focus primarily on the forces and realities—dreams, meditation, psychedelic experiences and other altered states of consciousness—which impact on the human being irrespective of how that individual is conceived. It might come to be recognized as a salient weakness of transperson-

alism that it does not have a systematic, or self-critical, philosophical anthropology. With the exception of the significant philosophical outline fashioned by Ken Wilber, particularly in his *Eye to Eye* and *Spectrum of Consciousness*, and the brilliant concluding chapter of Richard Tarnas' *Passion of the Western Mind*, transpersonalists as a group of like-minded thinkers and therapists have not taken up the responsibility of forming a



transpersonal view of person. Transpersonalism does have a shared conviction that person (individual, human being) has experiences held to be illusory by the positivist/naturalist philosophies which deny the spiritual, the inner depth dimension, the “trans” component, but thus far it has not formed a distinctive transpersonal philosophical anthropology.

Humanistic psychology, like humanism as a philosophy, opposes the naturalistic/positivist reduction of the cosmos and the individual to an impersonal mechanism; all varieties of humanism oppose the prevalent rejection of distinctively human values and aspirations but do not, however, share with the transpersonalists a commitment to altered states of consciousness, or to the extraordinary as particularly revealing for ordinary consciousness. Against a

worldview which sees the human, and particularly the individual, as a by-product of mindless material forces, “humanistic” affirms a universe in and through which the human being is capable of generating and sharing distinctively human meanings and values. Transpersonal psychologists affirm all that humanistic psychology stands for in contrast to the depersonalization of modern Western scientific thinking, but they also insist, with William James,

that “the human being is continuous with Something More.”

In philosophical terms, this emphasis on “something more” indicates that transpersonalists tend to be closer to Plato than to Aristotle, closer to Hegel than to Hume, closer to James than to Dewey, closer to the Taoists than to the Confucians, closer to the Vedantists, Sufis, Buddhists and mystics of

all varieties than to conventional religious experience. While the transpersonal movement has been informed and inspired by peak experiences of virtually all religious traditions, it not surprisingly draws most comfortably from Buddhist theory and practice: with almost all forms of Buddhism, transpersonalism tends to value healing practices in response to *dukkha* (the pain of existence) without attachment to a particular ontology of the spiritual world. Each of the widely disparate practices which can be gathered under the transpersonalist umbrella carries significant philosophical assumptions and implications, but it has thus far been characteristic of this movement to remain incomplete or at least unsystematic with respect to philosophical considerations.

As a contemporary Western
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worldview and approach to healing with a significant, albeit implicit, philosophical attitude, transpersonalism stands against a cluster of like-minded philosophies variously identified as positivism and materialism, as well as scientific and naturalistic humanism. Hence, it stands in opposition to the philosophical materialism of Freud and the deterministic behaviorism of B. F. Skinner. Even a cursory review of the work of many current transpersonal theorists will surely indicate that the "trans" in transpersonal refers to a crossing over precisely to the kind of reality, to the kinds of experiences, which are ordinarily ruled to be philosophically inadmissible.

Modern Western naturalism, or scientism, has generally not held an agnostic position with respect to the "trans" dimensions of the universe, and of human experience, but has rather insisted on an atheistic position, one which rejects all positive claims for non-ordinary states of consciousness and insists that there are no possible sources of such non-ordinary states. More specifically, according to this contemporary Western philosophical presupposition (or paradigm), since there are no grounds for acknowledging non-ordinary or spiritual experiences, there is no ground for acknowledging spiritual realities.

Transpersonalism is of course emphatically opposed to this positivist worldview and image of the human being. It is also, however, eager to distinguish its vision from the seemingly unobjectionable image of the human being in the distinctively humanistic psychology such as that of Carl Rogers. With the humanism of a psychologist such as Rogers, the transpersonalist shares an almost innate concern with the positive dimensions of human nature and human experience. But transpersonalism spans the range of interests from the safe perspectives of humanistic emphasis on the normal and ordinary to the

transpersonal emphasis on the extraordinary, on the profoundly transformative and on alternate states of consciousness.

Abraham Maslow represents the transition in contemporary psychology from humanism to transpersonalism. With the exception of William James at the turn of the century, major philosophers have consistently ignored the experiential claims, and the range of experience,

on which transpersonal psychology has focused. William James, whose philosophy was at once characteristically American and transpersonal, as well as radically empirical and pluralistic, dedicated as much of his research and writing energies to psychological research as to standard philosophical topics.

James' classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and the thirty years of research published posthumously in *Essays in Psychological Research* (1987), represent a tour de force on behalf of the realities affirmed by altered states of consciousness—whether the mystical or conversion experiences recounted in his *Varieties*, or the channeling of news from the dead by Mrs. Piper, whom James referred to as his "one white crow." The remainder of James' philosophy permits posi-

tive reports from psychical research, but James himself did not integrate the content of such reports in his other philosophical works.

In addition to the themes raised by William James' research into the varieties of religious experience and psychical phenomena, transpersonalism can also rightly claim as its forebear C. G. Jung's research and therapies

concerning the pan-human expression of archetypal images. There is an important difference between these two paradigmatic transpersonal psychologists. James began his thought with his psychology (see *Principles of Psychology*, 1890), and proceeded to develop its philosophical justification as well as its ethical and religious applications. Jung attempt-

ed to isolate his psychology from philosophy, and as a result his writings are full of significant philosophical assumptions which he does not develop. Jung's archetypal psychology is surely the richest store of multicultural and transpersonal images and interpretations, but it shares with almost all other transpersonalist perspectives a lack of a critical or systematic discussion of his philosophical framework.

The philosophical mindset of

transpersonalism is also continuous with the creative genius of the nineteenth century artists and thinkers who celebrated the infinite, the interior, and the intriguing relationship between ancient and modern. The most well-established general term for this philosophical attitude would seem to be romanticism, the worldview which emerged in the eighteenth century and flourished in the nineteenth as a reaction against scientific rationalism. Transpersonalism is not related to romanticism as one school or movement to another, however, but rather as a variation on a larger theme. The term "vision" is especially apt in this discussion of transpersonalism and romanticism because both of these movements are characterized by a commitment to ever larger visions both in their own right and in reaction to the shrunken vision espoused by their predecessors and contemporaries.

As is generally acknowledged with respect to the term romanticism, we should speak of the romantic period (ca. 1780-1830), or we should use the plural—romantic movements (e.g. in Germany, France, England or America). A glance at representative anthologies such as Charles T. Tart, *Transpersonal Psychologies* (1975) or Wilber, Engler and Brown, eds., *Transformations of Consciousness* (1986), should be sufficient to establish a similar emphasis on pluralism with respect to transpersonalism: writings regarded as transpersonal share a common opposition to a narrow view of human experience, and a shared appreciation for the myriad varieties of extraordinary experience, but as a group transpersonalists represent an extremely wide range of intellectual and transformative disciplines.

There are other instructive similarities and differences between
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romanticism and transpersonalism. Both espouse a commitment to a larger, more interior and transformative view of human experience, and in this respect both are committed to a highly participatory rather than a spectator theory of knowledge. This attempt to overcome what Owen Barfield refers to as "dashboard" knowledge represents the transformative power of all forms of romanticism—and the potential transformative power of its latest expression, turn-of-the-millennium transpersonalism. The success of this movement will require that transpersonalism take as its own the romantic epistemology as developed by the paradigmatic but largely ignored nineteenth century exponents of virtually all transpersonalist themes—Goethe, Coleridge and Emerson.

In his *Romanticism Comes of Age*, Owen Barfield summarizes the thought of Goethe and Coleridge in terms which suggest ways in which they would be helpful in solving the problem with which transpersonalism has been primarily concerned:

The truth at the core of things is one and the same from whatever direction it is approached, and it is particularly interesting to observe that these two thinkers, starting from opposite poles, Goethe from the pole of Nature and Coleridge from the pole of Pure Reason or Spirit, meet. Both of them overcame . . . the fallacy

that the mind of man is a passive onlooker at the processes and phenomena of nature, in the creation of which it neither takes nor has taken any part, the fallacy that there are many separate minds, but no such thing as Mind.

While the similarities which transpersonalism bears to Asian and specific European worldviews and to the shamanic experience of indigenous peoples are increasingly well known, those to Goethe and Coleridge are largely neglected. Scarcely any attention has been paid to the relationship between contemporary American transpersonalism which has developed in the context of an emerging new paradigm, and nineteenth century New England transcendentalism which emerged in the context of European and American romanticism. Consider Emerson—romantic transcendentalist and transpersonalist *par excellence*—in whose thought we find a fully formed account of extraordinary states of consciousness.

While we do not find in Emerson reports on the practice of Vipassana meditation, or of holotropic breathing, or paeans to psychedelic and psychotropic experience, we do find an epistemology and an ethics which are both transpersonal in their affirmation of the infinite mind or spirit and powerfully affirmative of nature and the free, creative human being. For Emerson, individuals, by virtue of their original imaginative thinking, are the source of their own true relation to the universe. The generation of

transpersonalists, like every generation of romanticists and transcendentalists, must learn for itself the truth of Emerson's characteristically American plea prophetically expressed in his final essay, "Nature" (1836):

Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men [and women], new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Any one of these three thinkers—Goethe, Coleridge or Emerson—each of whom expresses and exceeds the romantic vision, can well serve as a worthy source of philosophic grounding for a full range of transpersonalist offerings. What is undeveloped in James and Jung, and insufficient in otherwise paradigmatic writings of Ken Wilber, could be constructed out of the epistemologies and worldviews of Goethe, Coleridge or Emerson. This resulting synthesis would advance the participatory epistemology outlined and urged in Richard Tarnas' groundbreaking work, *The Passion of the Western Mind*. ■