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# The Return of Perennial Perspectives? Why Transpersonal Psychology Should Remain Open to Essentialism

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# The Return of Perennial Perspectives? Why Transpersonal Psychology Should Remain Open to Essentialism

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In reply to Hartelius's (2016) response to my paper "From Philosophy to Phenomenology: The Argument for a 'Soft' Perennialism" (Taylor, 2016a), I provide arguments in support of my model from contemporary scholars of mysticism, who advocate a move from a philosophically-based perennialism to a phenomenologically-based essentialism. This discussion illustrates that perennialist perspectives are far from outmoded. I discuss the metaphysical aspects of my model, suggesting that there is no reason why transpersonal psychology should not address metaphysical issues, as long as they are secondary to phenomenological issues, and as long as they are based on evidence rather than wholly speculative. Attempts to exclude so-called non-scientific phenomena from transpersonal psychology are based on invalid arguments, including an outmoded concept of the importance of falsifiability. I argue that attempts to explain the commonalities in accounts of spiritual or mystical experiences across and outside traditions through radical diffusionism, contextualism, or neuroscientific reductionism are inadequate. I note that these commonalities also feature in accounts of near-death experiences and accounts of intense post-traumatic growth. I also highlight the importance of historical cases of *natural wakefulness* in individuals with no familiarity with spiritual traditions. I conclude with comments on the nature of recent debates in transpersonal psychology and on the importance of pluralism.

**Keywords:** *soft perennialism, essentialism, mystical experience, metaphysics, contextualism, science*

Part of the purpose of this article is to respond to the criticisms that Hartelius (2016) has made of my *soft perennialism* model (as presented in Taylor, 2016a). At the same time, the paper will explore further aspects and ramifications of my model, and its relationship to contemporary perspectives in the study of mystical experiences. In the process, I aim to present a case for an *essentialist*—rather than contextualist—interpretation of *expansive states of being* as they occur both within and outside spiritual traditions. In addition, I would like to address wider issues relating to the field of transpersonal psychology, including its relationship to metaphysics and science.

I will begin with a brief summary of my model. The basic aim of Taylor (2016a) was to argue that transpersonal theorists such as Hartelius and Ferrer (e.g., 2013) have been too ready to dismiss a perennialist perspective that suggests that the transformational processes and mystical experiences described across

spiritual traditions share certain essential features. In Taylor (2016a) I highlighted seven common themes in the depictions of the process of "spiritual awakening" across various traditions. These are: (1) increasing and intensifying awareness; (2) a movement beyond separateness and towards connection and union; (3) cultivating inner stillness and emptiness; (4) developing increased inner stability, self-sufficiency, and equanimity; (5) a movement towards increased empathy, compassion, and altruism; (6) the relinquishing of personal agency; and (7) a movement towards enhanced well-being. My own research has suggested that when spiritual awakening occurs outside the context of spiritual traditions, the same themes and trends emerge. This implies that there is a common psychological landscape of expansive experience which is interpreted in different ways across spiritual traditions, and outside them.

In view of this, I suggested, some form of perennialism is necessary, and I put forward a

model of soft perennialism that is different from traditional perennialism in a number of significant ways. For example, soft perennialism is primarily phenomenological rather than philosophical; it does not posit an end point to spiritual development; it does not speak in terms of rigid, pre-given structures of spiritual development (as does Wilber's model, for example); and it is not based on a concept of a transcendent *other* but includes the experience of an immanent and all-pervading spiritual force. In contemplative or mystical traditions associated with monotheistic religions, this all-pervading spiritual force may be conceptualized in theistic terms, while in other systems it may become conceptualized as fundamental spiritual principles such as *brahman*, *tao*, or *dharmakaya*.

In Taylor (2016a) I advocated a more phenomenological approach, focused on experiences that occurred outside the context of spiritual traditions and practices, suggesting that transpersonal psychology has traditionally been too oriented around spiritual traditions and practices (Taylor, 2016a). This form of perennialism has some commonalities with Ferrer's participatory philosophy, as acknowledged by Ferrer (2017). (Indeed, Ferrer has suggested the term *participatory perennialism* as an alternative to soft perennialism.) In fact, one of my initial motivations in formulating the model was to try to establish some common ground between perennial and participatory perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

My model could equally be seen as a form of essentialism. Some scholars have used perennialism and essentialism interchangeably (for example, Hollenback, 1996; Dible, 2010), but others—such as Almond (1988), Marshall (2005), and Rose (2016)—have seen perennialism and essentialism as distinct. According to this view, essentialism emphasizes the commonalities amongst mystical or spiritual experiences and practices in different traditions (as soft perennialism does) whereas perennialism refers to the claim that there is a common core of basic teachings across religious traditions, and so relates more strongly to the philosophical and conceptual frameworks of traditions. In other words, essentialism is more experientially or phenomenologically oriented, while perennialism is more philosophically oriented. Thus, Rose (2016) has associated perennialism with “religious doctrines and symbolism” and essentialism with “contemplative experiences” (p. 4). While as Marshall (2014) has put it, “mystical essentialists, unlike mystical perennialists (the two are often confused, but it

is important to make the distinction,) do not insist on a common core of teachings across traditions” (p. 7).

In these terms, my model is certainly more akin to essentialism than perennialism. In fact, in the original paper I could have used the term *essentialist phenomenology* rather than *perennial phenomenology* to emphasise the shift from a focus on doctrine and teachings (as in the perennial philosophy) to a focus on experience (as in an essentialist phenomenology). Essentialism can be seen as the evidential basis of perennialism, and it is the evidential aspects that I wish to focus on.

In the original paper, I used the metaphor of a psychological landscape that is viewed and interpreted in different ways by people who explore different aspects of it, and look at it from different perspectives. That is, the experiential landscape of expansive states of being can be interpreted in different ways according to different cultural and philosophical perspectives—and also according to different individual personality traits or tendencies. The question of ontology is not so significant—the important point is that these expansive ranges are part of human beings' collective and potential *psychological* experience.

My analogy is very close to the one used by James (1986), who described mystical experiences as “windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world. The difference of the views seen from the different mystical windows need not prevent us from entertaining this supposition” (p. 428). James was clear that this “wider world of meanings” contains a great deal of variety—in his words “a mixed constitution like that of this world” (p. 428)—and hence a great range of perspectives and interpretations.

### Contemporary Perennial and Essentialist Perspectives

One of Hartelius's criticisms was that my paper was too reliant on a small number of sources whom I chose because they supported my arguments. In this way, he accused me of unscholarly practice, drawing parallels with Wilber's unscholarly practice of misusing sources and Blackstone's of using uncritical interpretation of textual material (Hartelius, 2016). This is the “cherry picking” argument that is often used when academics or scientists use sources to justify a pre-formed theory.

I believe that Hartelius's criticism has validity in the sense that I was too reliant upon a small range of classic or well-established sources of mystical scholarship

(such as Underhill, 1911/1960; Spencer, 1963; Stace, 1964; Scharfstein, 1973; Happold, 1986; Forman, 1999). So what I would like to do in this response is to broaden my discussion to include some more contemporary sources. These sources show that perennialism (or essentialism) is far from an outmoded concept in the contemporary study of contemplative traditions and mystical experiences, and also that there has been a general shift towards a more phenomenological approach in the study of mystical experiences, along the same lines as my suggestion of moving from a perennial philosophy to a perennial (or essentialist) phenomenology. I do not intend to suggest that perennialism is now the consensus view, but simply to show that perennial perspectives are prevalent in contemporary scholarship, and that these lend support to my soft perennialist outlook.

There are many contemporary scholars of mysticism who have emphasized the commonalities within contemplative traditions and suggested—in a similar way to Taylor (2016a)—that this is due to a shared domain of experience (not of teachings) which underlies different conceptions and interpretations. For example, Rose (2016) has highlighted a number of “contemplative universals” within the meditative experience of different traditions. Specifically comparing what might be considered the meditative manuals of Theravada Buddhism, Patañjali Yoga, and Catholic mystical theology, he has found that the commonalities are so striking that they point to a “religion-neutral spiritual itinerary constituted by a repeatable and invariant progression of experiential states” (Rose, 2016, p. 4). Rose has found that there are “virtually identical sets of mystical experience that are induced by the deepening concentration” in each of these traditions even though they are associated with “distinct and doctrinally irreconcilable religious systems” (p. 3). Favoring a phenomenological approach (as I do,) he has attempted to move away from a perennialism based on “elusive common doctrines” (what I would refer to as *hard perennialism*) towards a more phenomenologically-oriented essentialism, where it is possible to find a “universally plausible common ground” (p. 4). Rose has found it possible to adopt what he has called *apophatic pluralism* without advocating contextualism. He has taken evidence for *contemplative universals* from modern scientific fields such as neurology—for example, the fact that brain scans show similar patterns of neurological activity amongst contemplatives of different traditions.

### **The Return of Perennial Perspectives?**

Studstill (2005) has also argued for a great deal of commonality amongst the transformative processes experienced by mystics across a variety of traditions. He has particularly highlighted the commonalities between Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen teachings and the medieval German mysticism of Meister Eckhart, Suso, and Tauler, showing how the superficially different aspects of these traditions are reconciled within the essential unity of mystical traditions. Adopting a systems theory approach to mystical experience, he has explained how different mystical practices “disrupt the processes of mind that maintain ordinary, egocentric experience and induce a structural transformation of consciousness” (Studstill, 2005, p. 6). He has described the transformation that ensues in a similar way to Taylor (2016a), in terms expansion and enhancement:

The essential characteristic of this transformation is an increasingly sensitized awareness/knowledge of Reality that manifests as (among other things) an enhanced sense of emotional well-being, an expanded locus of concern engendering greater compassion for others, an enhanced capacity to creatively negotiate one’s environment, and a greater capacity for aesthetic appreciation. (Studstill, 2005, p. 7)

Nevertheless, Studstill’s (2005) *mystical pluralism*—as he has referred to his model—has a great deal of room for variety, as its name suggests. Although Studstill has allowed for “an unconditioned, unmediated experience of the Real” (p. 26) he has also accepted that most experiences are conceptually mediated to some extent.. Thus, he has advocated a “moderate form of constructivism,” at the same as holding that “unmediated experience is possible” (p. 20).

Another contemporary scholar sympathetic to essentialism is Marshall (2005, 2014), who has emphasized both the commonalities and differences across spiritual traditions. In his investigations into the metaphysical implications of mystical experience, Marshall has favored a form of essentialism that he has termed *mystical aspectism* whilst recognizing contributions from context and biology to mystical phenomenology. In Taylor (2016a), I noted that an all-pervading spiritual force is frequently depicted as having qualities of radiance, such as when, in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, *brahman* is compared to the sun. Marshall (2014) has also highlighted this feature:

The language of light that is a common feature of emanative metaphysics, expressive of the outflow of creation from its source and of mystical return to that source ... is probably more than symbolism based on universal familiarity with the life-giving sun, for special experiences of luminosity are a very common, cross-cultural feature of mystical experience. (p. 6)

Marshall (2014) has been critical of the “radical contextualists [who] asserted that mystical experiences are thoroughly conditioned by their religious contexts” (p. 10). He has suggested that their conclusions are not based on the phenomenological evidence of clear-cut mystical testimonies, but on “abstract mystical ideas and metaphysics, for which experiential sources are often unclear or not at all visible” (p. 10).

### Quantitative Research

However, some of the strongest contemporary evidence for a perennialist or essentialist perspective stems from Hood (1975) and the cross-traditional studies using his psychometric “mysticism-scale” (M-scale). For example, a study by Streib and Hood (2013) found that *spiritual but not religious* individuals shared fundamentally similar experiences without being attached to any particular religion or tradition, suggesting that there is an underlying experience which is expressed through spirituality, irrespective of a person’s religious orientation (if any). Similarly, a study by Chen, Qi, Hood, and Watson (2011a) explored the phenomenology of the mystical experiences of 139 Buddhist monks and nuns, using thematic coding and statistical analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis supported Hood’s thesis that “the phenomenology of mystical experience reveals a common experiential core that can be discerned across religious and spiritual traditions” (p. 654). That is, the experiences of these Buddhist practitioners corresponded closely to previous findings with individuals associated with other traditions. A study of the experiences of Tibetan Buddhist monks (Chen, Hood, Yang, & Watson, 2011b) had very similar findings.

As Hood (2006) stated, “psychometric and empirical evidence for the common core thesis is substantial and continues to accumulate” (p. 1). This evidence suggests that the same core characteristics of mystical experiences occur no matter what religious or spiritual tradition a person is affiliated with, and even

when they are not affiliated with any tradition. As stated in my original paper (Taylor, 2016a), expansive states of being often occur with many of the same characteristics both within and without spiritual traditions.

Partly inspired by Hood’s M-Scale, I and my co-researchers Kilrea and Bilodeau (St. Paul University, Ottawa, Canada) recently developed a scale that attempts to test for an ongoing state of wakefulness (rather than temporary experiences, such as Hood’s), entitled the “Inventory of Secular/Spiritual Wakefulness” (Kilrea & Taylor, 2016; Taylor, 2017). Through two pilot studies, and with the aid of several consultants with relevant expertise, the study was rigorously tested for content validity, construct validity, and internal consistency reliability, until a final scale containing 28 items emerged, with a high degree of reliability and validity. The items of the scale related to a variety of characteristics that previous research had associated with the construct of *wakefulness*, including perceptual characteristics such as *intensified perception* and *increased presentness*, affective characteristics such as *increased sense of connection* and *reduced identification with thoughts and mental constructs*, conceptual characteristics such as *decreased sense of group identity* and *increased inner security*, and finally behavioral characteristics such as *the relishing of inactivity* and *reduced interest in materialism* (Kilrea & Taylor, 2016; Taylor, 2017).

The scale was tested further with a group of 291 individuals from the general population, and 30 individuals who belonged to a hypothetically awakened group, most of whom were not associated with any particular spiritual tradition. Scores of the awakening group were significantly higher than those of the general group, showing statistically significant differences (Kilrea & Taylor, 2016; Taylor, 2017). This research is in its initial stages, so limited conclusions should be drawn, and there are potential issues of circularity, which further applications of the scale may potentially clarify. (A paper detailing the development and initial testing of the scale is presently in preparation. Further testing of the scale is also being conducted.)

### A New Day for Perennialism?

This list of contemporary scholars of mysticism who are sympathetic to forms of perennialism or essentialism could easily be extended. For example, Sarbacker (2005) has also advocated an anthropological and phenomenological approach rather than an

ontological or theological one. Brainard (2000), Saso (2015), and de Castro (2015, 2017) have also advocated perennialist or essentialist perspectives.

It appears that, to some extent at least, there is a return to perennialist or essentialist perspectives. Rose (2016) has actually spoken of a “new day for perennialism” (p. 1) and the “recovery of mystical essentialism” (p. 4) after the notion had become unfashionable with the popularity of Katz’s (1978) “radical contextualism.” Rose has described a “return to the nomothetic—universalising and essentialising—explanatory approaches to the study of religions and mystics” and a “new boldness in moving beyond constructivism towards essentialism amongst mystical scholars” (p. 4).

This is not to say that perennialism or essentialist perspectives are now dominant. The debate between contextualism and essentialism continues. There are also approaches that see both perspectives as problematic. For example, Taves (2009) has developed an *attributionist* approach as an alternative to both contextualism and essentialism. She has suggested that experiences only become religious or mystical when they are deemed as such; that is, when special or unusual experiences are attributed with a religious meaning. Komarovski (2015) has suggested that constructivist or essentialist models are Eurocentric and incompatible with the schemas of Tibetan Buddhism, and that the debate should shift to the processes and techniques that induce the experiences, rather than the experiences themselves. Ferrer’s (2002, 2017) participatory philosophy could also be seen as an attempt to move beyond both perennialism and contextualism.

However, it is important to be aware that contemporary perennial perspectives have become more nuanced and sophisticated, emphasizing similarities and differences—as well as assimilating contemporary fields and theories such as systems theory and neuroscience—and including biological, contextualist, and pluralistic elements. There is a general recognition that earlier forms of perennialism (such as those espoused by Huxley [1945] or Schuon [1984]) were too simplistic, glossing over plurality in their zest to find unanimity. Again, one of the most significant aspects of this in relation to Taylor (2016a) is the movement away from the philosophical aspects (that is, a focus on doctrines) towards a more phenomenological approach (that is, a focus on experience) in keeping with the distinction between a perennial philosophy and a perennial (or essentialist) phenomenology.

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In other words, the rejection of perennialism by some contemporary transpersonal psychologists appears not to take account of—and to be out of step with—contemporary debates in studies of mysticism and religion. The perennialism depicted and rejected by, for example, Hartelius (2015) and Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) is in many respects a proverbial straw man of unsophisticated early perennialism, centered around Wilber’s simplistic structuralist perennialism or the traditional perennialism of Huxley (1945) and Schuon (1984). In the critique of the perennial philosophy in Hartelius and Ferrer (2013), for example, no reference is made to any of the contemporary more nuanced and phenomenologically oriented forms of perennialism I have outlined above.

In any case, Hartelius and Ferrer’s (2013) statement that, “the more closely accounts from different mystical traditions are compared, the more they can be seen to differ” (p. 190) seems extremely dubious. This may perhaps apply to doctrines and beliefs, but it is hard to see how it could apply to accounts or experiences (that is, in the most accurate use of these terms, it might be true in a perennialist sense, but not in essentialist one). Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) have apparently made the same error that essentialists accused Katz (1978) of—that is, of comparing teachings rather than actual accounts (Forman, 1999; Marshall, 2005).

### **Alternative Explanations for Commonalities**

Of course, it is possible to accept that commonalities exist and attempt to explain them in other ways besides perennialism or essentialism. However, radical diffusionist explanations (that is, the attempt to explain all commonalities in terms of diffusion, without recognizing other possible contributions, including experiential) appear highly implausible. If there was a chain of influence in the way this argument suggests, surely accounts of experiences would have altered beyond recognition over centuries of dissipation (as in the game of Telephone) rather than remaining similar. (This is in addition to a lack of evidence of significant cultural contact, as argued by Marshall [2014].) And of course, when one considers that such experiences occur not just in the context of spiritual traditions, but in a secular context amongst individuals who do not have any grounding in spiritual traditions (and who live in cultures without overt expression of spirituality) then the concept of diffusion makes no sense at all.

In his response paper, Hartelius (2016) actually contradicted the previously quoted assertion (that “the more closely accounts from different mystical traditions are compared, the more they can be seen to differ,” [Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013, p. 190]) by acknowledging that similarities exist, but suggesting that their existence can be explained in terms of the biological and psychological correspondences amongst human beings. As he wrote, “humans share quite similar DNA and physiology. An explanation that relies on neuroscience and phenomenology rather than on belief in some sort of pervasive consciousness that is claimed to be the basis of all existence, seems both more parsimonious and more credible” (p. 43). Hartelius illustrated this with the example of falling in love. However, if mystical experiences are rooted in neurology or DNA, then one would surely expect them to be more common, in the same way that the experience of falling in love is common. But of course, mystical experiences occur infrequently, and it appears that only a tiny minority of human beings experience an expansive state of being (equivalent to spiritual awakening) as their normal state. Surveys of spiritual and mystical experiences have found that between a third and a half of individuals have had them, and in most cases just once (for example, Greeley, 1975; Hay & Heald, 1987). What would be the neurological or biological basis of an experience which most people have apparently never had?

Another problematic aspect of the linking of awakening experiences to neurology is that it appears to be a form of what Marshall (2014) has described as “neuroscientific reductionism,” the tendency to explain mystical experiences in terms of “common neurobiological and psychological mechanisms” (p. 11). There are many arguments here, but I will highlight three. Firstly, in a general sense, there is the difficulty of explaining any conscious experience as causally connected to neurological mechanisms. The problematic nature of this has been highlighted by many scholars (for example, Chalmers, 1996; Kelly et al., 2007; Tallis, 2011; Nagel, 2012). In the language of the philosophy of consciousness, this relates to the so called *hard problem* (highlighted by Chalmers, 1996) of explaining how the soggy lump of matter of the brain can give rise to the amazing richness and variety of subjective experience. So, in specific relation to awakening experiences, how is it possible to explain such rich and intense experiences in terms of greater or lesser activity in certain parts

of the brain, or in terms of the activities of certain neurotransmitters or hormones? In McGinn’s (1989) analogy, this would be as miraculous as turning water into wine.

Secondly, neuroscience has yet to establish any reliable or consistent correspondence between specific mental states and specific patterns of neurological activity, which one would expect if the latter produced the former. As Kastrup (2014) has stated, “Empirical observations reveal an inconsistent and even contradictory relationship between subjective experience and measurable parameters of neural processes” (p. 33). This is also evident from the lack of a clear relationship between brain states and psychological conditions such as depression or ADHD, and the lack of evidence for a significant benefit of drugs designed to increase the brain’s serotonin uptake (or to change the activity of the neurotransmitters supposedly associated with ADHD; Healy, 2015). Finally, phenomena such as near-death experiences (when subjective experience seems to continue when the brain is clinically dead) and terminal lucidity (when people with severe brain damage experience a return to normal consciousness shortly before death) also argue against a straightforward link between neurology and conscious experience (Kelly et al., 2007).

#### **Further Arguments in Favor of Essentialism**

In Taylor (2016a), to support my argument that there is an experiential landscape of more expansive and intensified awareness (equivalent to different degrees of wakefulness) that precedes interpretation and conceptualization by different spiritual traditions, I drew on my research into awakening experiences, and ongoing states of wakefulness, suggesting that essentially the same characteristics occurred as those highlighted by spiritual traditions. Another important piece of evidence here (not emphasized in my original article for reasons of space) is the many historical examples of individuals who experienced ongoing expansive states of being (or wakefulness) without being associated with spiritual traditions, or even having any real knowledge of spiritual practices and paths. Many of these examples are discussed in Taylor (2017), including the poets D. H. Lawrence, William Wordsworth, and Walt Whitman, and figures such as the nature writer Richard Jefferies and the idealist and social activist Peace Pilgrim.<sup>2</sup>

Such examples provide very strong evidence against the radical contextualist position. Katz (1978)



has commented on how the mystic-to-be grows up in an environment full of “images, concepts, symbols, ideological values, and ritual behavior” (p. 33) with mystical teachings appearing at a later stage. But this is manifestly not true in the case of mystics—and many of those who have temporary mystical experiences—who grow up outside the context of religion and spirituality, in secular cultures without overt knowledge or support of spirituality.<sup>3</sup>

It is also worth noting that secular awakenings and the similarities of cross-traditional experiences are not the only arguments against contextualism. Three other problematic issues—summarized in Marshall (2005)—are (1) the disparity between experience and content (that is, mystical experiences often diverge from the contexts and concepts of the traditions they are associated with); (2) difficulty of expression (that is, if mystical experiences are constructs of the traditions they are associated with, surely it should be easy to describe them with reference to the concepts to these traditions—but of course, the opposite is frequently the case); and (3) the failure of contextualists to distinguish between different levels of interpretation, or to take into account evidence showing that perception is largely independent of high level cognitions such as theories and beliefs, so that as Marshall (2005) has put it, “the power of theories and beliefs to condition perception has firm limits” (p. 187).

Given that strong commonalities appear to exist (as in the common depictions of the process of awakening suggested in Taylor, 2016a, and in the transformational processes identified by Studstill, 2005, or the contemplative universals identified by Rose, 2016), I feel that the most valid way of explaining them is in terms of a common landscape of expansive experience—or “the more expansive and inclusive world” described by James (1986, p. 428), or the common experiential core of Hood’s (2006) hypothesis—that is explored, viewed, and interpreted in different ways, by individuals who are both part of and outside spiritual traditions.

To extend the landscape analogy, mystics and teachers of various spiritual traditions are the explorers of this psychological landscape. Because of their cultural and individual psychological differences, they explore it in different ways, following different routes, and they experience and encounter different aspects of it. So when they leave accounts or maps showing their journeys—as spiritual teachings or accounts of their experiences—the

maps have a great deal of variation, but also show strong commonalities.

Let me point out again that in my view it is not so important to consider whether this landscape is *ontologically* real. It is perhaps enough to treat it in *psychological* terms—that is, one should think in terms of ranges of potential psychological human experience, which appear to be accessible to all human beings, as aspects of the human psyche which may not be part of normal experience for most human beings, but which are may be uncovered in certain circumstances.

### Metaphysical Issues

This leads me to the topic of metaphysics. One of the critical points raised by Hartelius is that, in the original paper, I addressed metaphysical issues while claiming not to be doing so. I agree that the metaphysical issues were not addressed with a great deal of clarity in the paper. In retrospect, I feel that I was more cagey about metaphysics than I should have been. So let me now try to express myself more clearly.

I did not intend to imply that the soft perennial model does not make metaphysical claims. One of the points I was trying to make was that it is perfectly valid for transpersonal psychologists to make metaphysical claims about the nature of reality, provided these are not wholly speculative or abstract. A distinction can be made between abstract or speculative metaphysics, and phenomenological or experiential metaphysics. Schopenhauer (2012) criticized Kant for creating a conceptual metaphysics rather than a metaphysics that was expressed *in* concepts—that is, for creating a metaphysics that was too abstract and speculative. According to Schopenhauer (2012), metaphysics should be empirical rather than merely rational, built on phenomenology rather than just on concepts. As he wrote, “It is true that universal concepts should be the material *in* which philosophy deposits and stores up its knowledge but not the source *from* which it draws its knowledge. ... It is not, as Kant defines it, a science *from* concepts but a science *in* concepts” (p. 41, italics in original).

Another example might be a religious metaphysical system that a person accepts through belief rather than experience (for example, when a person accepts the notion of God or heaven and hell through cultural transmission without actually having experience of them). I see Wilber’s perennialism as another example

of a metaphysics that is speculative and conceptual. This is the main issue I have with his model—that it is an overly conceptual metaphysical structure, based on his own interpretation of contemplative traditions, rather than one based on research or phenomenological evidence.

Hartelius (2016) stated that “the claim that a pervasive spirit-force constitutes the essence of reality is a metaphysical assertion, whether or not Taylor intends it to be so” (p. 43). I agree that this claim is metaphysical; I also agree that it would be more accurately expressed as saying that, in expansive states of being, an all-pervading spiritual force may be a fundamental feature of human beings’ *experience* of reality, rather than a feature of reality itself. But my argument is that this is not an abstract and speculative metaphysical claim but one which is supported by some degree of phenomenological evidence. It is not wholly conceptual, as Schopenhauer complained of Kant, but to some degree evidence-based. This evidence includes anthropological reports, spiritual texts, poems, reports of spiritual experiences, and so on. I accept that other researchers may interpret this evidence in a different way, but have attempted to make a case for my own perspective.

In other words, as stated in the original article, I believe it is appropriate to consider metaphysical claims and ideas as long as they are based on phenomenology “rather than being based on abstract analyses of spiritual traditions or on theoretical speculation” (Taylor, 2016a, p. 32). Daniels (2005) has made a similar point, stating that “if metaphysics is to mean anything at all, it must be based on sound phenomenology” (p. 174).

Nevertheless, one of the points I tried to put across in Taylor (2016a) is that transpersonal psychology should be primarily phenomenological, and only metaphysical in a secondary sense. (As noted in the original paper, Daniels [2005] has also stated this view.) So when I recommended that transpersonal psychology should move “away from metaphysics and theory towards a more phenomenological research-based approach” (Taylor, 2016a, p. 36) I did not intend to imply that transpersonal psychology should move away from metaphysics *altogether*, only that this should not be a major concern. As I wrote in the original paper, “If there are any metaphysical speculations to be made, they are secondary, deriving from this phenomenological analysis” (Taylor, 2016a, p. 19).

For me as a researcher, metaphysics is not so important. As noted above, it is enough to consider that

the landscape of potentially expansive human experience is a shared aspect of human psychology. One should consider what this might imply about the nature of reality—that is, the ontology it implies (Ferrer, 2002)—but this should not be a paramount concern. This accords with Husserl’s (1963) view that, in the phenomenological examination of experience, the ontological existence of things was not so significant. That was the concern for natural scientists—for the phenomenologist, experience was paramount.

### Dispensing with Metaphysics?

In any case, how can it be possible to move away from metaphysics entirely? How would it really be possible for transpersonal psychology to dispense with metaphysics, as Friedman (2013) has suggested? Hartelius (2016) has stated that “It is probably not possible to remove all metaphysical assumptions from any context, including science” (p. 44), but this seems to underplay the importance of metaphysical assumptions in forming interpretations, *particularly* with regard to science.

It is impossible *not* to operate within some kind of metaphysical framework. Even if a theorist states that he or she is dispensing with metaphysical issues, there is still some form of metaphysical framework motivating their attitude to these issues, including the decision not to address them. This is an error often made by materialist scientists, and that is also made by Friedman (2013). Materialist scientists may believe that they are observing reality objectively, by focusing on hard facts, and disregarding any phenomena or idea that has not been empirically proven or that cannot be tested. But materialist science itself incorporates metaphysical assumptions. As Ferrer (2014) has put it, “Scientific naturalism is not only thoroughly metaphysical, but also arguably shaped by economic interests perpetuating an eco-pernicious, disenchanting worldview that imposes methodological blinders on transpersonal researchers” (p. 157). Scientific materialism is a belief system that holds that matter is the primary reality, and that all phenomena can be explained in terms of the interactions of particles of matter, or as epiphenomena of materialist interactions. The skeptical attitude of materialist scientists to such fields as spirituality and psychic phenomena is not an avoidance of metaphysics but the result of a materialist metaphysical paradigm. As many observers (for example, Habermas, 2008; Nagel, 2012)

have suggested, scientific materialism has many of the characteristics of religious dogmatism.

As Ferrer (2014) has pointed out, Friedman (2013) has made the same error, believing that he is endeavoring to make transpersonal psychology more empirical by excluding “the transcendent” or “trans-conceptual”—which he has defined as “anything that is supernatural and metaphysical” (p. 307). In principle, this would mean eliminating the study of psychic phenomena and nondual or transcendent states of consciousness. But in reality this simply means shifting transpersonal psychology into a different kind of metaphysical paradigm—namely, that of scientific materialism. As Ferrer has put it, “turning the field into a modern scientific discipline effectively binds transpersonal psychology to a naturalistic metaphysical worldview that is hostile to most spiritual knowledge claims” (p. 152).<sup>4</sup>

Hartelius (2016) has made a similar error of conflating metaphysics with the unscientific by stating that “a more common contemporary understanding is that metaphysics refers to subjects that cannot be examined scientifically” (p. 43). What exactly does science mean in this context, and how can it be free of metaphysical claims itself? Hartelius’s own notion of what science is stems from his own underlying metaphysical paradigm. It is impossible for any perspective to be outside of metaphysics. Hartelius has rightly suggested that researchers should be aware of their own underlying metaphysical assumptions, but it is not clear whether he has heeded this advice himself.

In an especially helpful article, Marshall (2014) has suggested seven possible explanatory positions in relation to mystical experience, which may be associated with different metaphysical positions. These are (1) mystical perennialism; (2) radical diffusionism; (3) mystical essentialism (which is related to mystical aspectism); (4) mystical mediationism; (5) radical contextualism (as espoused by Garside [1972] and Katz [1978]); (6) post-modern relativism; and finally (7) neuroscientific reductionism. Marshall’s point is that scholars usually adopt at least one (and possibly more than one) of these explanatory paradigms, even if they are unaware of doing so. As he has written, “It is far better to bring metaphysics out into the open than let it operate surreptitiously in the background” (p. 11).

So which paradigm—or paradigms—should transpersonal psychology include? Rejecting all forms

of perennialism or essentialism, the metaphysics of Hartelius and Friedman appear to be varied combinations of diffusionism, contextualism, and post-modern relativism, with hints of neuroscientific reductionism.

The distrust towards metaphysics of Friedman and Hartelius is reminiscent of the philosophical field of logical positivism, which held that only statements descriptive of sense experience were meaningful. Metaphysical statements were meaningless because they could not be reduced to statements about sensation, and so could not be verified via the senses. In this way, logical positivists attempted to reduce philosophy to a narrow discipline centered round logic and language. Is it really possible that a similar reductive agenda can be applied to transpersonal psychology? Should the field really try to exclude metaphysical claims (although of course this is actually impossible in any case) and nondual states? If so, the question must be asked: At what point does transpersonal psychology cease to be transpersonal? At what point does one take the *trans* out of transpersonal? At what point does the field cease to be transpersonal and simply become equivalent to positive or cognitive psychology?

In any case, such attempts to limit the range of transpersonal psychology are actually based on a false dichotomy between the scientific and unscientific. This attitude is based on the view that such nonmaterial phenomena as metaphysical ideas and nondual states of consciousness are unscientific because they are unfalsifiable. Hartelius (2016) has exemplified this simplistic binary position by suggesting that Wilber’s metaphysics is invalid because he “has made an unfalsifiable claim about the ultimate nature of reality” (p. 43). Hartelius has rejected the concept of nondual consciousness because it is “an unfalsifiable assertion about the foundational nature of reality—and as such it is a metaphysical assertion” (p. 44). He has suggested that phenomena are only validly scientific when they are testable and falsifiable. Everything else is metaphysical and therefore of questionable validity.

However, in the contemporary philosophy of science, it is generally recognized that it is far too simplistic to make a distinction between falsifiable science and unfalsifiable metaphysics (and other unscientific disciplines such as Marxism or psychoanalysis). As Kelly (2015) has summarized, “philosophers of science now generally reject Popper’s arguments for the universal primacy of falsification over confirmation” (p. 499).

Kelly has pointed out that the importance of falsification in historical scientific practice has been massively overestimated, and that scientific theories generally cannot be proved or disproved, but gain credence by gradually accumulating evidence over time. Most scientific advances are the result of confirmation of bold theories rather than falsification (Chalmers, 1979; Kelly, 2015).

It is certainly debatable whether Popper's falsification criterion can be applied to social sciences. Metaphysical theories may be evaluated according to other criteria, such as internal consistency, subsumptive power, and attention to data. In other words, falsification is certainly not the only quality by which metaphysics should be evaluated. Metaphysical theories do not become invalid simply because they cannot be falsified. It is therefore impossible to draw a line between the scientific and unscientific (Tauber, 2009; Ferrer, 2014).

So to return to the question: What metaphysical paradigms should transpersonal psychology include? Should the field accept a quasi-materialist framework, some combination of contextualism and neuroscientific reductionism, a Wilberian perennial-structuralist framework, or Ferrer's participatory model (depending on whether this is seen as a metaphysical model or not)?<sup>5</sup> I would argue that it is valid to include a phenomenologically (rather than philosophically) oriented soft perennialist or essentialist model. Since diffusionist, radical contextualist, and neuroscientific explanations are inadequate, I believe this is the most satisfactory way of explaining the commonalities of expansive states of being both across religious traditions and outside them (such as the common aspects in depictions of awakening noted in Taylor [2016a], or the similarities identified by Studstill [2005] and Rose [2016]).

However, this does not mean I am suggesting that this should be the only paradigm. It is surely acceptable for transpersonal psychology to include a variety of metaphysical perspectives. One of the virtues of the soft perennialism described in Taylor (2016a) is that it offers a great deal of room for variety and plurality, as with Ferrer's participatory philosophy. I agree with Ferrer (2014), who has stated that, "the field should not be defined or limited by its allegiance to any single inquiry approach, epistemology, or metaphysical worldview" (p. 153). (This relates to the issue of inclusiveness, which I will address in the last section of this paper.)

### Possible Research Bias

Let me briefly address the third criticism Hartelius (2016) made of my original paper (Taylor, 2016a): I do not show enough awareness of how my own biases and beliefs could influence my research findings. Although I only included a very short summary of my research in the original paper, I agree that I did not emphasize this. It is impossible for any researcher to be unaffected by their own biases and beliefs, and it is important to introduce measures to provide greater validation. In my own case, I am aware that my own perspective is influenced by my own background of non-traditional spiritual experiences, and in particular, my personal experiences of becoming aware of a spiritual force apparently pervading phenomena, and space itself (see note 2). Perhaps if I had a background in traditional religion, or was more strongly associated with particular contemplative traditions, then my perspective would be different.

This is an issue I have become more aware of in recent years, and have tried to mitigate. For example, in a recent study of 90 awakening experiences (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017) the reports were analyzed by myself and another researcher (whose background was in conventional psychology and who had little knowledge of transpersonal psychology, or of my own work) independently, for greater validation. I have also recently completed a research project on ongoing states of wakefulness originally triggered by bereavement, in which the thematic analysis has been conducted by an independent researcher (the same individual mentioned above), to reduce possible bias. The latter study also includes quantitative measures (including the Inventory of Secular/Spiritual Wakefulness mentioned earlier—which has itself of course undergone a rigorous process of validation).

One of the points I tried to make in Taylor (2016a) is that both ongoing states of wakefulness and temporary awakening experiences have the same fundamental characteristics when they occur both within and outside the context of spiritual traditions. These characteristics, I suggested, include heightened awareness or intensified perception (or a process of increasing and intensifying awareness), an increased sense of connection (or a movement beyond separateness towards connection and union), reduced cognitive activity with less identification with thoughts

(a process of cultivating inner stillness and emptiness), and enhanced well-being (Taylor, 2016a).

Whilst acknowledging the likelihood that my research findings were affected to some degree by my intentions and biases, it is important to remember that these findings are by no means just my own. In effect, my findings replicate many others. There is a large amount of research showing that both temporary and ongoing experiences of expansive states of being can occur outside a traditional spiritual context, with very similar fundamental characteristics. This evidence is particularly strong in relation to temporary experiences, as was seen above in relation to cross-traditional studies using Hood's M-Scale. Similar evidence has been found amongst the thousands of experiences collected by the Religious Experience Research Unit (based at the University of Wales), the research of individuals such as Greeley (1975), Robinson (1977), Hardy (1979), Hay (1987), and Hoffman (1992), as well as the earlier research of figures such as Johnson (1960) and Laski (1961).

In terms of ongoing expansive states, it is significant that my findings were very similar to those of Miller and C'de Baca (2001), who interviewed more than 50 individuals reporting a sudden and permanent psychological transformation. Miller and C'de Baca termed this transformation *quantum change* and described it as "a vivid, surprising, benevolent, and enduring personal transformation" (p. 4), which can be so sudden that it "break[s] upon consciousness like a forceful wave" (p. 39). Miller and C'de Baca identified two different types of quantum change—the *mystical* and the *insightful*. The characteristics of the former are very similar to the characteristics of traditional mystical experiences, with the difference that they became established as permanent traits: a noetic quality, a sense of unity, transcendence and awe, a deep sense of well-being, and a deeper sense of spirituality (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001). Significantly, as in my research, a strong association was found between this transformation and intense psychological turmoil; more than half of the incidences of quantum change were related to intense unhappiness, trauma, or tragedy.

My findings were also very similar to studies of the after effects of near-death experiences. Research has repeatedly found that many of those who have near-death experiences undergo a permanent transformation into a more expansive state of being, including characteristics such as intensified perception, an increased sense of

connection to nature, an increased capacity for love and compassion, reduced interest in material wealth and personal success, a heightened sense of meaning, a new spiritual outlook, and a reduced fear of death (Moody, 1975; Grey, 1985; Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995; Sabom, 1998; Van Lommel, 2006; Sartori, 2015).

Both the research into the after-effects of near-death experiences, and Miller and C'de Baca's (2001) research into quantum change, illustrate that a shift into a more expansive state of being can occur in exceptional circumstances, in reaction to intensely traumatic events that appear to dissolve a person's ordinary self-system. This seems to enable a new, higher-functioning self-system to emerge, with a much more expansive awareness in phenomenal, conceptual, subjective, and intersubjective terms (Taylor, 2017). There is a sense of moving beyond limitations into a more intense, deeper, and wider reality—that is, into what I described as a more expansive experiential landscape (Taylor, 2016a), or the "wider world of meaning" identified by James (1986). Significantly, both in near-death research and in Miller and C'de Baca's (2001) research, many individuals have undergone this shift outside the context of spiritual traditions, without any prior interest in spirituality or any experience of spiritual practice.

Studies of post-traumatic growth provide similar evidence. Typical characteristics of post-traumatic growth include a greater sense of appreciation, a stronger sense of connection to nature and other people, a stronger sense of meaning and purpose, a more accepting attitude to death, and a greater interest in spirituality (Cryder, Kilmer, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2006; Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006). Particularly in its most intense form, post-traumatic growth shares many commonalities with a shift into a more expansive state of being, as described in the above research. This similarity is reflected in my use of the term *post-traumatic transformation* for cases of sudden shifts into a more expansive state of being in my research, when they occur in the context of intense psychological turmoil (Taylor, 2012, 2013, 2016b).

In effect, the findings of Miller and C'de Baca (2001), and research into the after-effects of near-death experiences, and cases of post-traumatic growth, add support to my argument that there is a common landscape of expansive psychological experience which can be explored outside the context of spiritual traditions. In other words, they could be seen as offering further support to the essentialist or soft perennial perspective.

As noted above, I agree that this claim is influenced by my own perspective and experiences. Others may look at the same data and reach different conclusions. Further research on expansive experiences or states outside the context of spiritual traditions may help to clarify matters.

### **The Nature of Scholarly Debate**

Finally, I would like to comment on the tone of Hartelius's response to my article (which was, unusually, published in the same issue as my original article). I found the tone of the article hostile and adversarial—for example, when he wrote that the “primary contribution [of my essay] is to illustrate that its particular approach is wholly unworkable and shows no future promise” (Hartelius, 2016, p. 42). There was also the insinuation that I have misused my academic credentials by popularizing ideas based on shoddy scholarship. As he wrote,

It is unfortunate that Taylor's ideas were not vetted more carefully before being disseminated as a popular book. Those with advanced degrees, and the credibility these degrees confer, have a responsibility to educate their public readers carefully, rather than using public forums to advance ideas that may be appealing to a popular audience but lacking in the soundness that might give them enduring value. (p. 46)

In actual fact, this hostile tone is familiar from some previous discussions within the transpersonal community. Anderson (2015) has recently commented on the nature of such debates, and I think her points are worth quoting at length:

In transpersonal psychology, there have been far too many combative, even vitriolic, “debates” among individuals historically identified with the field. Controversy itself is fine and healthy for any field but attack is not. Anyone who has been in the field of transpersonal psychology for a decade or so is aware of many long-standing controversies. Not only do these hostilities divide the transpersonal community, but professionals outside transpersonal psychology have noticed that we do not always “walk our talk.” That is, we do not always live up to the spiritual values we promote and that duplicity undermines our public credibility. (p. 165)

I agree with Anderson that transpersonal psychology needs to adopt a much more inclusive approach. Of course, scholarly debate should be rigorous, but there has been a tendency of some transpersonal psychologists to aggressively smite down any views which disagree with their own, which suggests an inability to accept a plurality of different viewpoints. It is disappointing that some transpersonal psychologists seem to be fighting over territory, and disputing over their different visions of the field. This is an issue that many of my students of transpersonal psychology have picked up on, and which is often (in my experience) remarked on at conferences, usually with an air of concern and confusion. If there is any discipline which should be pluralistic, it should surely be transpersonal psychology. Even though I have a very different perspective to Hartelius, I have respect for his ongoing contributions to the field, including his diligent editorship of this journal—and I hope that he has some respect for my own contributions.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have attempted to provide a wider range of evidence for a perennialist or essentialist perspective from more contemporary sources, making it clear that this approach is far from outmoded, and providing further evidence for my assertion that there is a landscape of expansive psychological experiences that precedes interpretation by spiritual traditions. My advocacy of a more phenomenological approach to perennialist perspectives appears to be mirrored by approaches by some contemporary scholars of mysticism. These approaches are more nuanced and sophisticated, and more pluralistic and contextualist, than earlier hard perennial approaches, and as such they could be considered forms of soft perennialism. (Note again that some scholars—such as Marshall (2005) and Rose (2016)—have used the term essentialism to refer to experiences and transformative practices and outcomes, reserving the term perennialism in reference to teachings or doctrines. In this sense, I am advocating essentialism).

I have also tried to clarify the metaphysical aspects of soft perennialism, at the same time as highlighting flaws in Hartelius's own attitude to metaphysics. I believe that transpersonal psychology should be open to essentialism, and at the same time address metaphysical issues and make metaphysical claims, as long as these are evidence-based and as long as

they emerge from (and are secondary to) phenomenology. The phenomenological evidence that I feel supports my model—and a perennialist or essentialist perspective in general—includes the commonalities of cross-traditional reports of mystical experiences and of depictions of the process of awakening, similarities with accounts of near-death experiences and accounts of post-traumatic growth, and examples of individuals who have experienced expansive states (both temporarily and on an ongoing basis) outside the context of spiritual traditions. At the same time, I have argued that other attempts to explain these commonalities and similarities—such as radical diffusionism, contextualism, or neuroscientific reductionism—are inadequate.

Additionally, the inadequacies (and the contradictions) of a pseudo-empirical scientific attitude (which is itself bound to a form of metaphysics) should be acknowledged. It is short-sighted—and outmoded—to decide that certain experiences or concepts should be disregarded or regarded as invalid or suspect because they are unfalsifiable or untestable. This would deprive transpersonal psychology of some of its most interesting and potentially important data. From this point of view, it is perfectly acceptable for transpersonal psychology to address metaphysical issues, paranormal phenomena, and nondual states.

To move away from this reductionist agenda would not only harmonize transpersonal psychology more with recent developments in other fields, but also ensure that the field remains as pluralistic as possible. Although advocating an essentialist approach, I believe there should be room for a wide variety of different perspectives and methodologies, with an integrative openness and pluralistic outlook which should remain, as Lancaster (2013) has written, “the defining feature of transpersonal psychology” (p. 225).

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### Endnotes

1. Ferrer (2017) has recently written a critique of my “soft perennialism” as an appendix to his book, *Participation and the Mystery*. His evaluation is generally positive and respectful—for example, he has written that “I find much of value in S. Taylor’s proposal even beyond its fundamental points of convergence with the participatory approach” (Ferrer, 2017, p. 264) and that “soft perennialism should be regarded as an important advance in the ongoing perennialist/participatory dialogue” (p. 272). However, Ferrer (2017) has also highlighted three specific shortcomings of my approach in the light of his participatory philosophy. These are (1) intra-subjective reductionism, (2) privileging

an “essential” spiritual force over metaphysical depictions of that force (this creating a hierarchical framework,) and (3) possibly falling prey to a form of the “myth of the given.” These are salient points that I will respond to at a later date.

2. Whitman is one of the best examples of a “natural mystic.” His experience of the world was intensely pantheistic, with a strong sense of a spiritual force pervading both all phenomena and his own being. Whitman was highlighted by Bucke (2017) as a case of “cosmic consciousness,” and by Maslow (1994) as an example of a “self-actualized” person. Although influenced by Emerson and the transcendentalist movement, Whitman’s form of mysticism was highly idiosyncratic, and unrelated to any particular spiritual tradition. He certainly never followed any spiritual tradition, nor any conventional spiritual practice. In his later years, Whitman did develop some familiarity with Indian philosophy but apparently not any deep or detailed knowledge. When Henry David Thoreau met Whitman, he remarked that *Leaves of Grass* was “wonderfully like the orientals.” Thoreau asked Whitman if he had read oriental works, and he replied, “No, tell me about them” (in Cowley, 1973, p. 919).

Once Eastern spiritual texts became more widely available, many observers noticed parallels with Whitman’s work, and sought evidence that he was influenced by them. However, as the literary critic Cowley (1973) remarked, “What is extraordinary about this Eastern element is that Whitman, when he was writing the poems of the first edition [of *Leaves of Grass*] seems to have known little or nothing about Eastern philosophy. It is more than doubtful that he had even read the Bhagavad-Gita, one of the few Indian works then available in translation” (p. 972). (This evidence includes the absence of any references to Indian texts in Whitman’s preparatory notebooks, despite references to many other books.) Rather, as Cowley suggests, Whitman’s wakefulness seems to have been completely natural and spontaneous (see Taylor, 2017, for a fuller discussion on Whitman.)

A similar but lesser known “natural mystic” is the mid-19th century British nature writer Richard Jefferies, who almost certainly had no knowledge of Eastern spiritual traditions or religious mystics. As the mystical scholar Happold (1986) wrote of him:

He found that “eternal now” of which the mystics had spoken. He reached a doctrine of the “nobility of the soul,” which is akin to Eckhart and Sankara. Though the only idea of God with which he was acquainted was that of the religion of his own environment, in his condition of a “deity” beyond “deity” he tried to express in fumbling words what Eckhart and Rysbroeck had expressed so much more adequately in the distinction they drew between the Godhead and God. (p. 385)

- 3 I should also mention my personal perspective here. At the age of around 16, I began to experience unusual states of being, in which I would be filled with a powerful sense of inner well-being and a sense that the world around me was alive and filled with meaning. I was often awestruck by the beauty and vividness of things. I felt drawn to quiet natural spaces, where I felt a powerful sense of harmony. I felt that I was deeply connected to the world around me and that there was a connection between the phenomena around me, as if they were expressions of a something greater than themselves. However, at the time, I did not understand these experiences. My background was secular, with no religion or spirituality at all. I only began to understand the experiences when, at the age of 22, I impulsively bought a book called *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* by F.C. Happold (1986), from a local bookshop. The book had a revelatory effect on me. I saw my experiences reflected in it. I read passages from *The Upanishads* and *The Bhagavad-Gita* and related strongly to their descriptions of *Brahman* pervading the world, illuminating it and bringing all things into oneness. I read excerpts from the writings of non-traditional mystics such as Richard Jefferies and strongly identified with their experiences. So from this point on I had a framework to make sense of my experiences.

I am therefore a good example of a person who experienced expansive states of being outside the context of—and without knowledge of—spirituality, but who nevertheless had spiritual experiences, in line with the view that the psychological landscape of expansive states of being exists beyond and prior to interpretation by spiritual traditions. This personal background has undoubtedly influenced my perspective.

4. Another issue with Friedman’s (2013) argument is his contention that “transcendent” states cannot be investigated scientifically because scientific investigation relies upon a duality between subject and object. However, to move beyond subject-object duality does not necessarily mean that the subject ceases to exist, or ceases to be capable of observation or knowledge. This confuses individuation with separation. The subject can still be individuated at the same time as existing as part of a greater whole, in the same way that a wave can exist as a form in its own right at the same time as being one with the whole ocean. (Meister Eckhart repeatedly stated that, even in the deepest states of mystical union, a tiny spark of individuality remained [Kelly & Grosso, 2007]). The knower and the known do not have to be separate for knowledge to arise. In fact, one could say that to participate in the whole as a subject facilitates a deeper level of knowing, since it entails more intimate knowledge, authentic *gnosis* rather than the superficial intellectual knowledge that comes from external observation. In reality, it is only *conventional materialistic* science that implies that knowledge depends upon a duality between object and subject. Moving beyond duality contravenes that model, but not necessarily science itself.

In addition, the movement beyond duality is one of the primary and most common principles of contemplative traditions (Taylor, 2016a), and it could be argued that the study of such “transdual” states is one of the primary historical aims of transpersonal psychology (since transpersonal literally means “beyond-self”.) And so a field that excluded the study of such states would hardly merit the term “transpersonal.”

Note that I have used the term “transdual” rather than “transcendent.” From the perspective of “soft perennialism” the concept of “the transcendent” holds little relevance, since spirit is seen as immanent and all-pervading. Spiritual development is not seen in terms of transcendence but in terms of *expansion*. Expansive ranges of experience are not transcendent but simply an extension and intensification of normal awareness. And in fact, this accords with the perspective of many spiritual traditions. As Ferrer has put it, “While Friedman’s portrayal of the transcendent may be consistent

with certain apophatic mysticisms (Sells, 1994), it is by no means inclusive of the variety of ways in which supernatural realities have been enacted, understood, and described” (2014, p. 158). Although some traditions speak of a neumonal absolute (for example, the *Ein sof* of the Kabbalah, which cannot be experienced in its pure form, although it emanates through the material world), this certainly does not apply to Daoism or the many schools of Tantra, for example. Most traditions—even Christian mystical traditions—do accept the possibility of direct experience of an ultimate referent (Ferrer, 2014).

5. The question of whether Ferrer’s Participatory Spirituality can be considered a metaphysical framework is an interesting one. Ferrer has claimed not, partly because what he has called “the mystery” is undetermined, which neutralizes potential metaphysical biases, and also because of participatory spirituality’s plurality and its emphasis on “pragmatic values” rather than universal or objective ones. However, in Taylor (2016a) I discussed Ferrer’s concept of the “mystery” in relation to its similarity to the concept of an all-pervading spiritual force. I concluded that it was impossible to judge this due to the intentional vagueness of Ferrer’s depictions. In a similar way, Ferrer’s insistence on the “undetermined” nature of the mystery could be construed as a reluctance to, in Marshall’s words, “bring metaphysics out into the open” (2014, p. 11). In any case, when Hartelius described participatory philosophy as suggesting, for example, that “consciousness in some form penetrates through all physicality” (Hartelius, 2015, p. 26) it is difficult to see how, as a metaphysical claim, this differs much from my description of all-pervading spiritual force. Other aspects of participatory philosophy’s view of the world—for example, as a dynamic open-ended system with no duality between subject and object, and the human mind and the natural world being of the same nature (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013) —could surely also be construed as metaphysical claims.

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