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## **Embracing Metaphysics: Transpersonal Psychology as a Post-Materialist Approach**

A Review of *Shadow, Self, Spirit: Essays in Transpersonal Psychology* by Michael Daniels

**Steve Taylor**

**Abstract:** Michael Daniels's book *Shadow, Self, Spirit* is an essential book for students of transpersonal psychology – perhaps the clearest, most wide-ranging and well-written overview of the topic that has yet been written. However, this article suggests some problematic areas with Daniels's approach, such as his criticism of transpersonal psychology's focus on states of consciousness, and (in particular) his sceptical attitude to metaphysics. I suggest that it is impossible for transpersonal psychology to avoid metaphysics, and that the best approach is to be explicit and rigorous about our metaphysical orientation. I discuss different types of "bad" metaphysics, with Ferrer's concept of "the mystery" as an example. I offer a defence of my "soft perennialist" model against Daniels's criticisms. There are four main reasons why transpersonal psychology should embrace a post-materialist outlook: (1) it is impossible to avoid some form of metaphysical orientation; (2) the field has traditionally been associated with such a metaphysical orientation; (3) the evidence for some form of post-materialism is compelling; (4) by committing to a post-materialist orientation, the field can contribute to a cultural shift away from materialism and its destructive effects. Since there are such a broad variety of post-materialist perspectives, this would not involve abandoning a pluralistic approach.

**Keywords:** metaphysics; perennialist; post-materialism

Since its original publication in 2005, Michael Daniels's *Shadow, Self, Spirit* has become established as one of the essential texts in transpersonal psychology. As a comprehensive introduction to and overview of the field, it has few equals – perhaps only the *Wiley-Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology*, published in 2013. However, in my view, the Wiley-Blackwell Handbook was marred by the overly ideological approach of the editors, who were seeking to promote their own vision of transpersonal psychology. Whilst the book contained many excellent individual chapters, in places it read like a textbook on parapsychology written by skeptics. Daniels's book lacks this overt ideological bent and has a

more balanced approach. Every year I heartily recommend both books to my master's level transpersonal psychology students, but usually the Handbook comes with a caveat.

This new edition of Daniels's book consists of one new chapter, and each of the original chapters has been updated. Thankfully, the new material does not disrupt the flow of the text. I was a student of Mike's at Liverpool John Moores University, from 2007-8, and always enjoyed his lectures. He was (and no doubt still is!) an excellent communicator, and this gift is evident in his writing too. Although the book is aimed at an academic audience, it reads as easily as any popular book.

There are many admirable aspects of Daniels's approach, such as his view that transpersonal psychology is essentially, in his words, "about the expansion and extension of our sense of self – about the transformation of the self beyond its relatively enclosed and impermeable egoic boundary" (2021, pp. 222-3). Daniels argues that, from this point of view, transpersonal psychology need not concern itself with spiritual "ultimates" such as God or nirvana. Daniels also makes an important point that much spiritual development occurs through general life experience, rather than through specific spiritual practice (although I feel that Daniels underplays the potential transformative effects of spiritual practice). I share Daniels's view that transpersonal psychology has been too closely associated with spiritual traditions, and that there needs to be a greater emphasis on transformational experiences that take place outside the context of traditional spirituality. Most of the reports of awakening experiences and ongoing spiritual transformation that I have investigated in my own research have occurred in a "secular" context, often to people who know little or nothing about spirituality (Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Egato-Szabo, 2017; Taylor, 2021).

However, despite this (and despite my overall admiration of the book), in this review I would like to take issue with some aspects of Daniels's approach to transpersonal psychology. In particular, I would like to respond to his criticisms of my own "soft perennialist" model.

### **Jungian Perspectives**

It is impossible to "bracket out" the conceptual background which we carry with us when we enter any academic field. Daniels's approach to transpersonal psychology is clearly informed by his background in Jungian psychology. This perspective underlies many of the criticisms he makes of the field. For example, in keeping with his Jungian background, Daniels describes "the need for the discipline to face its own shadow," including the "problem of evil" (2021, p. 278). Daniels also criticises "transpersonal psychology's emphasis on states of

consciousness and on an *ascending* path of transformation that leads to an ultimate state of bliss or enlightenment” (p. 278). He emphasises the importance of “exploring unconscious processes to achieve greater understanding and psychological wholeness” (ibid.).

There are some problematic areas here. Higher states of consciousness are rightly an essential concern of transpersonal psychology because they represent an expansion of awareness, a falling away of the limitations of ordinary consciousness, and a temporary experience of a more expansive state that could potentially become permanent. Daniels states that such experiences may not lead to long term personal development and may in fact encourage spiritual narcissism. This may be true in some cases, but research indicates that awakening experiences (or temporary higher states of consciousness) usually do have positive long-term effects, leading to a greater sense of optimism, humility, increased self-esteem, less interest in material goods, a shift to a more spiritually-oriented lifestyle, and so on (Taylor & Egato-Szabo, 2017; Woolacott et al. 2020; Corneille & Luke, 2021). In Taylor & Egato-Szabo (2017), 51 of 68 participants described such after-effects. Many also reported an increased interest in spiritual traditions and self-development. Only 11 of the participants reported negative after-effects, which were mainly due to a sense of frustration at the loss of their heightened awareness. Similarly, in a recent study of 152 spontaneous spiritual awakenings and spontaneous kundalini awakenings, Corneille and Luke (2021) 98% of participants reported long-term positive effects. This fits with abundant research showing that psychedelic-induced mystical experiences and other spontaneous mystical experiences are linked to recovery from addiction (Green et al., 1998; Galanter et al., 2007; Strobbe et al., 2013; Garcia-Romeu et al., 2014; Kaskutas et al., 2003; Galanter et al., 2013). Surely such pivotal experiences should be an essential topic of transpersonal psychology’s investigations, along with long term and ongoing transformational or spiritual states.

Another point is that the distinction Daniels makes between “ascending” and “descending” processes is too sharp. It is surely correct that we need to explore unconscious processes to achieve psychological wholeness, but this often occurs in the process of following a nominally “ascending” path of spiritual development. Transpersonal or spiritual development involves an expansion of identity and awareness, which also involves increasing subjective awareness, and increased contact and exploration of unconscious processes. Overall, the process of spiritual development of awakening brings healing and integration to the whole of the psyche. There is no need to think in terms of going up or down – just a general expansion of awareness, in all directions.

## Metaphysical Mistrust

Daniels' Jungian background also appears to inform what might be referred to as his "metaphysical scepticism." Perhaps we should first clarify what the term "metaphysics" means. Metaphysics is the area of philosophy that deals with questions about the fundamental nature of reality, and of human existence and human nature. In this sense, typical metaphysical questions are: "What is the nature of reality? How is the mind related to the body? Does life have a meaning? Is there life after death? Is the world an illusion generated by our minds?" So transpersonal psychology becomes metaphysical when statements are made about the nature of reality (e.g., about the existence of a universal spirit or God, or different realms of existence) or about the nature of human beings or human existence (e.g., about the existence of an individual soul or spirit, of different levels of consciousness, chakras, or about reincarnation and life after death). In these terms, it is sometimes forgotten that conventional materialism is a metaphysical worldview in that it consists of a number of assumptions about reality and human nature – for example, that human beings are essentially genetic machines, that consciousness and mental activity are generated by brain activity, that there cannot be any life after death, and so on (Kelly et al. 2007; Taylor, 2018).

Daniels is not opposed to metaphysics within transpersonal psychology in principle. He does not agree with Friedman and Hartelius that "transpersonal psychology should reject ALL metaphysical ideas in a quest to become a truly empirical and rational science" (Daniels, 2021, p. 205). As he writes further, "in my opinion it is not possible, or useful, to demarcate and delimit transpersonal psychology to such a positive science" (p. 227, n.151). The issue, for Daniels is not metaphysics itself, but "when *particular* metaphysical ideas are smuggled into transpersonal psychology that are unclear, ambiguous, absolutist, unsupported or are contradicted by empirical evidence or reason, or have no clear implications of functional consequences" (pp. 206-7).

This sounds fine in principle, but Daniels' attitude to metaphysics reminds me of Randi's Prize in parapsychology (McLuhan, 2019). In reality, despite his seeming openness, Daniels' criteria are so tight that very little is allowed through his metaphysical gates. Daniels is critical of Jung's "psychologism" in relation to the latter's concept of God as an archetype which is psychologically real as objects are physically real. Nevertheless, Daniels adopts a similar approach, attempting to separate psychology from philosophy, and to keep transpersonal psychology free of metaphysical claims. This brings a tentative and sceptical tone to his writings, even if this is not his conscious intention.

## **Soft Perennialism**

This sceptical attitude is evident in Daniels's discussion of my own "soft perennialist" approach (Taylor, 2016, 2017a). Briefly, soft perennialism differs from traditional "hard" perennialism in that it does not focus on the teachings and principles of religious or spiritual traditions (which vary a great deal) but on mystical experiences across different traditions, and the process of long-term spiritual awakening as it is depicted across traditions. Soft perennialism also has a strong focus on mystical (or awakening) experiences and long-term spiritual awakening outside the context of spiritual traditions.

I have suggested that there are seven common themes in the process of spiritual awakening as it is depicted across traditions, including increasing and intensifying awareness, a movement beyond separateness and towards connection and union, the cultivation of inner stillness and emptiness, and a movement towards increased empathy, compassion, and altruism (Taylor, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). Such themes are also evident when spiritual awakening occurs outside the context of spiritual traditions, as a part of general life experience or due to specific transformational experiences. This implies that there is a common psychological landscape of expansive experience which is interpreted in different ways across spiritual traditions, and outside them. Mystical experiences are seen as glimpses of this landscape of expansive experience. Since different traditions have different concepts and metaphysical backgrounds, such experiences are interpreted and described in different ways, in the same way that people observing and exploring a landscape from different vantage points offer different descriptions. As William James (1986) put it, mystical experiences can be seen 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 [that mystical experiences are windows on reality]" (p. 428).

Perhaps the most significant variant of such experiences are those described by people who have no affiliation (or background in) spiritual traditions. As well as being an argument against the contextualist view that mystical experiences are generated by different religious or spiritual traditions (Katz, 1983), such "secular" mystical experiences arguably offer descriptions of a landscape of expansive human experience in a more "raw" form, with less interference from a religious and philosophical background. As Smart (1962) put it, such accounts are more free of ramified language, and of the concepts and expressions of religious belief-systems.

In a discussion about my approach, Daniels argues that “soft perennialism is an attempt at metaphysical smuggling” (2021, p. 207) and an example of a “specific (and questionable) metaphysical concept.” In particular, Daniels objects to my suggestion that a landscape of expansive human experience described in mystical experiences features an “an all-pervading spiritual force...[that] may appear to underlie the whole phenomenal world, in such way that the phenomenal world may appear to arise from it” (Taylor, 2016, p.30).

### **Bad Metaphysics**

In my view, Daniels’s arguments are invalid for a number of reasons. Firstly, I would argue that it is impossible to divorce metaphysics from psychology. Like Daniels (and Hartelius and Friedman), early in his career William James believed that metaphysical questions had no place in psychology. James initially advocated a “descriptive psychology” that examined correlations without investigating how they arose or what they implied (Lambeth, 1999). Soon afterwards, however, James changed his mind. He came to believe that a “descriptive psychology was ungrounded and unstable...a psychology particularly fragile, into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint” (James, 1892, pp. 467–468). As James further stated in his presidential address to the American Psychological Society in 1894, “no conventional restrictions can keep metaphysical and so-called epistemological inquiries out of the psychology books” (James, 1895/1978, p. 88). In fact, James believed that rather than avoiding the area, psychology could make a significant contribution to metaphysics by investigating the relationship between the mind and body (Kelly, 2007). And I would argue that this still holds true. At the very least, since psychology involves the study of the mind and brain, the metaphysical issue of how the mind relates to the brain is profoundly significant and should be investigated.

As James implies above, even if psychologists (or scientists in general) do not overtly address metaphysical issues, the issues are always in the background, informing one’s perspective and approach. Ferrer (2014) has made the same point while critiquing Friedman’s view that transpersonal psychology should adopt a positivist approach. According to Ferrer, this inevitably entails a shift to a worldview of scientific naturalism which is hostile to spiritual and supernatural phenomena. As Ed Kelly (2007) has pointedly stated, “The real issue, in short, is not whether we will have metaphysics [in psychology], but whether we will have good metaphysics, or bad” (p. 632). Daniels recommends that transpersonal psychologists should “bracket out” their metaphysical assumptions and thereby remain “agnostic”, trying not to allow their own views to bias their research. This is surely

impossible though, like an English person who goes abroad deciding that they are no longer English and will not allow their upbringing to affect their behaviour.

In a similar way, the scholar of mysticism Paul Marshall (2014) has argued that one cannot escape some kind of metaphysical perspective towards mystical experiences. Marshall suggests several different perspectives, including mystical perennialism, radical diffusionism (i.e., that mystical experiences are caused by cultural influence), radical contextualism (i.e. that all mystical experiences are culturally constructed and culturally specific), post-modern relativism and finally neuroscientific reductionism. Since our view of mystical experiences is inevitably informed by one of these perspectives, we should be explicit about it. In other words, to avoid disclosing metaphysics is an act of “bad faith.” Since we cannot avoid it, we should, as Marshall puts it, “bring metaphysics out into the open” (2014, p. 11) while at the same time being cautious and rigorous.

In my view, there are three main types of bad metaphysics. First, bad metaphysics is when a metaphysical framework is unacknowledged or hidden. In the “Taylor-Hartelius” debate, I suggested that this was an issue with Hartelius’s approach. At various times in his writings, Hartelius has hinted at a “participatory” worldview in which “consciousness in some form penetrates through all physicality” (Hartelius, 2015, p. 26), while at other times he veers close to contextualism or neuroscientific reductionism. At the same time as hinting at these metaphysical positions, Hartelius emphasised the importance of excluding metaphysical issues from transpersonal psychology’s remit. This is bad metaphysics masquerading as an absence of metaphysics. Clearly, Daniels also has a certain metaphysical outlook underlying and informing his perspectives, so it would be helpful if he was more forthcoming about it.

Second, bad metaphysics is when metaphysical claims are abstract and speculative, rather than grounded in empirical research. The philosopher Schopenhauer complained about this aspect of Kant’s philosophy, arguing that philosophy should not be speculative and purely conceptual but empirical and phenomenological. In my view, there is a parallel here with Wilber’s work, due to his tendency to create complex and speculative theoretical models that lack a sound evidential basis and have not emerged from research.

Finally, bad metaphysics is when metaphysical concepts are expressed vaguely. Daniels argues that he has no objection to “general (unspecified and indeterminate) notion of a Transcendent Reality (or ‘mystery’)...but rather with the smuggling in of specific (and questionable) metaphysical concepts such as the incarnating individual soul, chakras, God, Absolute Consciousness or an ‘all -pervading spiritual force,’ unless this is done explicitly and tentatively” (2021, p.226). But why should metaphysics be fine if they are unspecified



and vague? That's like saying that political statements are fine as long as they are vague and general and don't actually answer any specific questions (which is unfortunately true of most political statements).

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### **Ferrer's Metaphysics**

In the above terms, Ferrer's concept of the "mystery" can be considered bad metaphysics, since it is so vague and general. Sometimes Ferrer refers to the mystery in terms that resemble an all-pervading spiritual force. For example, he has described it as "a common spiritual dynamism underlying the plurality of spiritual insights and ultimates" (Ferrer, 2002, p. 190). He has described it as a dynamic force with creative and spiritual power that equates to the "generative power of life" (p. 2). He has also described it as "underlying" and as having immanent and transcendent dimensions, resembling the concept of God or spirit as both immanent and transcendent in some mystical traditions. Human beings are "embodiments of the mystery" (Ferrer, & Sherman, 2008, p.6) and it is the source "out of which everything arises" (Ferrer, 2011, p. 22). It is because of such statements that Abramson (2015) has argued that participatory philosophy is actually a form of perennialism.

At other times, Ferrer's depiction of the mystery is more oblique. He has referred to it as "indeterminate" (Ferrer, 2002) or "undetermined" (Ferrer, 2011), or more poetically as "the irrepressible mystery that urges itself into manifestation through a thousand forms" (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013, p.196). To be fair, Ferrer has stated that this vagueness is intentional: "We deliberately use this conceptually vague, open ended, and ambiguous term" as a way of avoiding "claims or insinuations of dogmatic certainty and associated religious

exclusivisms” (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p. 64). Furthermore, Ferrer has used the “undetermined” nature of the mystery to argue that participatory spirituality is not a metaphysical framework, 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, Ferrer’s insistence on the “undetermined” nature of the mystery could be construed as a reluctance to “bring metaphysics out into the open” (Marshall, 2014, p.11). At any rate, the term “mystery” is so vague that it is almost meaningless. The concept is also questionable in terms of evidence. What evidence is there to support the existence of the “mystery”? Are there any reports of encounters with it from mystical experiences, or near-death experiences? What evidence is there that it “co-creates” spiritual realities in conjunction with human consciousness? How does this co-creation take place? These are legitimate metaphysical questions which should be addressed rather than ignored. In fact, because the concept is so vague, it is impossible to gather any meaningful evidence for it.

It is telling that when Ferrer or others describe participatory philosophy, they find it impossible to avoid making metaphysical claims. For example, as noted above, Hartelius describes participatory philosophy as suggesting 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.

This illustrates how difficult it is to “bracket” metaphysical claims and keep them out of transpersonal psychology, or any field – even for Hartelius, who has made the exclusion of metaphysical claims one of the core principles of his approach. Since we cannot keep these claims out, we should surely do our utmost to be explicit about them, and to allow them to be evaluated in terms of evidence.

### **The Evidence for Soft Perennialism**

What, then, is good metaphysics? This is when metaphysical claims are inferred by empirical evidence and are carefully developed and explicitly stated. Daniels (2021) suggests that phenomenology should be kept separate from ontology, and that the experience of a phenomenon does not provide evidence of its reality. However, I believe this view is too

relativistic. Phenomenology may not provide *evidence* of ontology, but it can *indicate* certain aspects of reality. Experiential data can be evaluated and compared to other sources of information. If experiences are shared and confirmed by a large number of people, or if patterns and common themes in experiences, and if they fit with other data, then this may point towards ontological status. The important point is that statements or claims about the nature of reality should be informed by *sound* phenomenological evidence. At the same time, they should be based on other theoretical criteria such as internal consistency, subsumptive power, and attention to data (Marshall, 2014). If a metaphysical theory is supported by sufficient evidence and meets these other criteria, then there is no reason why it should not be advocated, within transpersonal psychology or any other field.

This brings me to Daniels' criticism that the "soft perennialist" model is speculative, unclear and unsupported by evidence, and an attempt at "metaphysical smuggling." The idea that I am attempting to "smuggle" in metaphysical concepts suggests that I am doing this surreptitiously, as a kind of sleight of hand. In fact, I am completely open about my metaphysical position. There is no reason to be surreptitious, since I argue that it is perfectly acceptable for transpersonal psychology to adopt metaphysical positions.

As I argued in the "Taylor-Hartelius" debate, in my view the claim of a fundamental universal spiritual principle is supported by a wide range of data. This includes: the concepts of an all-pervading spiritual force that are common to most of the world's tribal indigenous groups; the similar concepts of an ultimate spiritual principle that are common to many mystical and spiritual traditions (e.g. brahman, the Tao, dharmakaya, the Godhead, the One etc.); the abundant reports from spiritual and mystical experiences (both religious and secular) of awareness of an all-pervading or fundamental spiritual force or radiance; and the reports from near-death experiences (see Taylor, 2016, for a fuller discussion.)

Of course, there are cultural differences between some of these concepts and experiences. *Brahman* is not quite the same as *Dao*, *En Sof* or The One, and so on. What the Lakota Indians call *wakan-tanka* (literally, the "force which moves all things"; Eliade, 1967) is not quite the same as what the Ainu of Japan call *ramut* (Monro, 1962), or what the Nuer of Africa call *kwoth* (Evans-Pritchard, 1967), and so on. Likewise, these indigenous concepts generally differ to some degree from the spiritual principles of spiritual traditions described above. However, there is an essential commonality in that all of these terms refer to an immanent and all-pervading spiritual force. Spiritual traditions' concepts of an underlying or ultimate reality (such as *brahman*, *Dao* or *En Sof*) can be seen as different interpretations and conceptualizations of this fundamental quality. In James's (1902) analogy, they are views

from different windows. Likewise, there are some conceptual and philosophical differences in mystical experiences as they are described in different traditions, and when they occur outside traditions. However, many religious scholars (Marshall, 2005; Studstill, 2005; Hood, 2006; Rose, 2016; Taylor, 2016) have identified fundamental commonalities in mystical experiences across traditions, and this has been confirmed by cross-cultural research using Hood's Mysticism Scale (Hood, 2006).

Near-death experiences also offer support to the notion of a universal and fundamental spiritual force. In NDEs (as in intense mystical experiences too) this all-pervading force is often perceived in terms of a translucent light, and also sometimes in terms of quality of all-pervading love or bliss. People often report feeling immersed in or pervaded by this light, as if it both inside and outside them. For example, I recently interviewed a man called David Ditchfield who had an NDE after a freak accident on a train platform, when his coat was caught in the doors of a train as they closed, and the train dragged him along the platform and on to the track as it set off. David found himself in space, engulfed by a white light that he felt "was the source of all creation. I never dreamed I would ever see anything so beautiful...[I]t was blindingly bright but didn't hurt my eyes. It was the beginning, where the universe started. It was the light of pure, unconditional love" (in Taylor, 2021, p.113). Similarly, I investigated the case of a man called Zak who had an NDE while in hospital undergoing treatment for acute myeloid leukemia. During a medical emergency, he found himself floating outside his body, aware of "translucent, luminous light...My whole body is imbued with translucent light...The whole universe derives its very existence from this light. Without this light nothing is able to exist" (ibid., p.121).

In addition, as I try to show in my book *Spiritual Science* (2018) the notion of a fundamental all-pervading spiritual force has a great deal of explanatory power, as well as internal coherence and consistency. The notion can help to explain phenomena which materialism cannot make sense of, such as consciousness, the influence of the mind over the body (as manifested in the placebo effect or in hypnosis) and altruism. It can also help to explain phenomena that materialists attempt to explain away because they cannot be accounted for within its parameters, such as psi phenomena, higher states of consciousness and near-death experiences.

There are many philosophical approaches based on the notion that the fundamental reality of the universe is not matter, but a non-material essence variously described as mind, consciousness or spirit. This is the foundational principle of various contemporary philosophical approaches such as analytic idealism (Kastrup, 2019), monadological idealism

(Marshall, 2019), cosmopsychism (Keppler & Shani, 2020), panspiritism (Taylor, 2020), and panexperientialism (de Quincey, 1994). These approaches have significant theoretical differences and conceive of a non-material essence in different ways. Nevertheless, there are fundamental commonalities between them. They are all “post-materialist” metaphysical approaches that reject the notion that matter is the primary reality of the universe and that mental phenomena are reducible to materialist causes. They posit that mind or consciousness is a fundamental universal quality that precedes matter. As well as positing a different relationship between mind and brain, these approaches allow for a more complex understanding of phenomena such as evolution, death (including the possibility of an afterlife), spiritual experiences, and psi phenomena (Kelly et al., 2007; Kelly et al., 2015; Taylor, 2018, 2020). Most importantly, all of the approaches affirm that that fundamental and universal nature of consciousness or mind confers a fundamental oneness to all phenomena, and to the universe itself. And significantly in terms of this discussion, the approaches allow for – and even support – the claim of soft perennialism that the fundamental reality of the universe is an all-pervading spiritual essence. (The recently published book *Consciousness Unbound* and its earlier companion volume *Beyond Physicalism* are recommended as a gateway to exploring these different post-materialist metaphysical perspectives.)

In other words, I feel that the notion of an all-pervading spiritual force is well-supported, both evidentially and theoretically. It is not “vague unclear, ambiguous, absolutist unsupported or are contradicted by empirical evidence or reason” (Daniels, 2021, pp. 206-7).

### **Metaphysical Grounding**

Since its inception, transpersonal psychology has traditionally been affiliated with a post-materialist outlook, assuming the existence of metaphysical phenomena such as consciousness and spirit. As it was originally conceived, the field was an attempt to integrate western psychology with eastern spirituality (or as Wilber more grandly put it, an attempt to marry the Enlightenment of the East with the Enlightenment of the west), so it inevitably assimilated metaphysical concepts from these traditions.

Lancaster (2002) has argued that it is impossible to omit such concepts from transpersonal psychology, as they are so fundamental to the field, and I would agree. In my experience as a lecturer, what attracts most people to transpersonal psychology is its association with spiritual traditions – and more specifically, its non-materialist or spiritual outlook. Many of our students are dismayed by the narrow physicalist assumptions of mainstream psychology, and long to continue their studies from a different metaphysical

perspective. Often they have themselves experienced expansive states of consciousness which can't be explained in physicalist terms, and feel that transpersonal psychology – precisely because of its non-materialist worldview – will provide them with a framework to make sense of their experiences.

In other words, transpersonal psychology is attractive because it suggests an alternative to materialism. It suggests that human beings are more than just biological machines consisting of selfish genes, and that the universe is more than just an inert machine running according to rigid physical laws. This non-materialist outlook continues to strongly define transpersonal psychology, which is why the attempts by Hartelius and Friedman and others to create a metaphysics-free naturalistic form of transpersonal psychology is unlikely to be successful. The notion seems contradictory, as if they are attempting to take the “trans” out of transpersonal psychology.

Rather than shying away from post-materialist metaphysics, I believe that transpersonal psychology should embrace it. There is certainly compelling evidence for some form of post-materialist orientation from a wide range of different sources, including psi phenomena, near-death and end of life experiences, after-death communications, the influence of the mind over the body, mystical experiences, and so on (Kelly et al., 2015; Kelly & Marshall, 2020). Daniels writes that “I do not reject the possibility of human interactions with supernatural forces or entities, but, as a transpersonal investigator, I would like clear evidence to support such interactions” (2021, p. 236). I would suggest that such clear evidence is already available, from the above areas and sources. Certainly, it appears that post-materialistic worldviews offer a much more inclusive and satisfactory account of the world and of human experience than physicalism (Kelly et al., 2007; Taylor, 2018).

In addition, it could be argued that transpersonal psychology has a cultural responsibility to embrace and support a post-materialist outlook. This standard materialist worldview of our culture has had disastrous consequences, both culturally and environmentally. It has created a pervasive sense of nihilism, which has itself led to excessive consumerism, hedonism and individualism – a sense that, since this world and this life are all there is, we should simply try to get as much out of it as we can. In biomedical terms, materialism has helped to establish a mechanistic model of the human organism in which psychological conditions are treated as physical disorders that can be “fixed” through pharmacological interventions. In environmental terms, materialism has encouraged and sanctioned an attitude of domineering recklessness to the natural world in which natural phenomena (which are after all no more than chemical machines) only have a utilitarian value

(Taylor, 2018). In other words, the materialist metaphysical paradigm is at the root of our present crises, and our future welfare as a species (and the welfare of our planet) may depend on a cultural shift to a post-materialist outlook

A significant recent development has been the “post-materialist science” movement, founded by a group of scientists including Mario Beauregard, Lisa Miller, and Gary Schwartz (Beauregard et al., 2014). The aim of this movement is to highlight the metaphysical assumptions that underpin materialist science (as described above), and to suggest that these are no longer viable, as they cannot explain or account for many aspects of human experience and multiple phenomena which appear “anomalous” from the standpoint of materialism. The post-materialist science movement has its own explicit metaphysical assumptions which fit more closely with scientific evidence and offer a more cohesive model of reality than materialism. One of these assumptions is that “Mind represents an aspect of reality as primordial as the physical world. Mind is fundamental in the universe, i.e., it cannot be derived from matter and reduced to anything more basic” (Beauregard et al., 2014, p. 273). Other key assumptions are that “There is a deep interconnectedness between mind and the physical world” and that “Minds are apparently unbounded and may unite in ways suggesting a unitary One Mind that includes all individual single minds” (p. 273).

Unlike most other psychological approaches, transpersonal psychology is traditionally allied to post-materialist science. Again, this is why the field has traditionally attracted people who have grown disenchanted with the materialist metaphysical paradigm and are keen to investigate alternative models of reality. Therefore, rather than attempting to adopt the metaphysical paradigm of naturalistic science—as Ferrer (2014) has suggested of transpersonal psychologists such as Friedman and MacDonald—and rather than attempting to be metaphysically neutral or to bracket out metaphysics (as Daniels suggests), it would surely be more advisable for transpersonal psychology to accept its natural allegiance to post-materialistic science, to adopt its metaphysical perspective, and to allow it to inform its approach.

It is important to point out that this does not just mean adhering to one particular metaphysical position. There are many forms of post-materialist metaphysics. In addition to the philosophical approaches I mentioned earlier, there are panpsychism (which itself includes many different varieties, such as panexperientialism and panprotopsyism), panentheism, dual-aspect monism, and non-Cartesian dualist-interactionist models (Kelly et al., 2015; Kelly & Marshall, 2021). So, adopting a general post-materialist metaphysical orientation does not necessarily entail ceasing to be pluralistic.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I believe that it is both inauthentic, unnecessary and actually *impossible* to exclude metaphysics from transpersonal psychology. As Lancaster has argued, Daniels's desire to bracket metaphysical assumptions is "both unrealistic and unnecessary" since the "efficacy of transpersonal practice is actually dependent on such assumptions" (2002, p.44). Or As James (1892) stated, even if we do not overtly state a metaphysical worldview, it is always there in the background, underlying and informing our perspective.

In my view, Daniels' attempts to "bracket out" metaphysics is actually an advocacy of bad metaphysics, as is Ferrer's vague and oblique concept of "the mystery." I agree with James that any form of psychology should be soundly grounded in metaphysics, otherwise it will be unstable and ineffective. Consequently, the best approach is to make our metaphysics as rigorous and explicit as possible. At this time of cultural crisis, transpersonal psychology should ally itself an over-arching post-materialist metaphysical approach that affirms that the fundamental reality of the universe is a non-material essence of some form, whether we refer to it as spirit, mind or consciousness. As well as being strongly supported by evidence and theoretically viable and philosophically sound, such a worldview offers a more holistic and healthy paradigm of reality than physicalism.

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