



## BOOK REVIEW

*Participation and the Mystery: Transpersonal Essays in Psychology, Education, and Religion*, by Jorge N. Ferrer, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017, 376 pp., \$29.95

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Over the last 20 years, Jorge Ferrer has been forging a new vision for transpersonal psychology, one that attempts to free the field from a priori metaphysical commitments and to create maximal openness for the full range and possibilities of transpersonal phenomena—or as he describes them, participatory spiritual events or enactments. Ferrer’s approach is “participatory” in a number of ways, but two of the most important are: (a) all spiritual and transpersonal phenomena and enactments are welcomed under this umbrella, and (b) participatory events are not characterized as simple subjective experiences, but rather have essential intersubjective and transpersonal dimensions and locales. As a faculty member at the California Institute for Integral Studies (CIIS), Ferrer has long been in dialogue with some of the leading transpersonal theorists and practitioners in the Bay Area and around the world, if the wide-ranging ideas and sweeping references in his writings are any gauge. In these writings, Ferrer engages other theories and ideas honestly, clearly, and without rancor. Ferrer is almost always evenhanded and scholarly and demonstrates an enviable equanimity—all admirable qualities for an author espousing high spiritual values.<sup>1</sup>

Ferrer’s (2017) current contribution to the transpersonal field, *Participation and the Mystery*, is based on a series of updated and revised essays written over the years after his original attempt to expound in detail his participatory approach in *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (Ferrer, 2002). Before making some observations about Ferrer’s alternative approach to transpersonal theory and practice, an overview of his most recent book’s content may prove useful. The book’s 10 essays are divided into three sections. Part 1, “Transpersonal Psychology,” begins by explicating Ferrer’s key notion of *participatory spirituality* and raises a question that the reader may well share: Should this stratagem be considered a disciplinary model, a theoretical orientation, or a paradigm? Although Ferrer concludes that it is too early to declare the participatory approach a paradigm, he nevertheless calls into question the adequacy of other transpersonal systems—especially their tendency to privilege specific kinds of transpersonal phenomena. Chapter 2’s

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<sup>1</sup> An exception is Ferrer’s response to some rather pointed comments from Ken Wilber, who seems able to get under any number of people’s skin from time to time. For more on the detrimental effect of public quarrels amongst transpersonal psychologists, see Rosemarie Anderson’s (2015) article, “Transpersonal Research and Scholarship: Reflections on the Last Twenty Years.”

confrontation with Freidman's proposal of separate spheres for transpersonal scientific investigation and transpersonal "studies" suggests that the participatory approach also entails a research agenda. In this context, Ferrer provides a convincing philosophical rationale for the possibility of serious research into so-called supernatural phenomena and its inclusion within transpersonal psychology. Chapters 3 and 4 develop Ferrer's understanding of a "fully embodied spiritual life." While this idea will no doubt be familiar to many readers, his emphasis on overcoming a widespread bias toward egocentrism, even in humanistic circles, and his full inclusion of our sexual and emotion selves in spiritual development, may prove more eye-opening.

"Integral Education" is the subject of the essays in Part 2, which flows naturally out of the final essays of Part 1. After reviewing the field of integral education in the first essay, Ferrer offers several detailed accounts of how this might be, and has been, attempted in therapeutic situations and education, including a graduate course on mysticism. In particular, Ferrer attempts to demonstrate how accessing inner wisdom and latent potentials is best actualized through an approach to spiritual growth that not only includes the intellect, the emotions, the body, and the subtle energies, but one that radically *integrates and unifies* these various functions into a "holistic transformation." Ferrer's elucidation of the importance of the human body in spiritual transformation is very welcome indeed, as it helps counteract the temptation to favor more ephemeral aspects of spirituality. My most valuable therapeutic experiences involved just this kind of psychophysical synthesis.

Part 3, titled "Spirituality and Religion," explores larger philosophical issues through encounters with Stanislaw Grof's research and cosmological speculations and Ken Wilber's integral theory; it concludes by considering some of the problems and possibilities facing religion today and in the future. In particular, this last chapter explores the varieties of religious pluralism in light of one of Ferrer's central themes: spiritual narcissism, an ego attachment to one's own spiritual attainments. Ferrer does a fine job of capturing the importance of Grof's work, including its bearing on mediation vis-à-vis the epistemological status of transpersonal intuitions. However, his extended critique of Grof's ontology might create an exaggerated impression of the importance Grof's metaphysical musings actually play in his overall theorizing. Nonetheless, I think Ferrer's summary and critique of Grof's notion of the "cosmic game" is on the mark, providing a helpful synthesis of Grof's ruminations on ultimate matters, especially for those not inclined to piece it together themselves. Ferrer's critique of Wilber's theories is well taken and extensive, questioning its perennialist predilections and experientialism, among other things. However, I wonder if a *metaphysical* critique, as I attempted in this journal some years ago (Buchanan, 1996), might not better cut to the heart of Wilber's difficulties. Back then, I argued that Wilber's metaphysical use of "holons" as simultaneous whole-part relations produced an unfortunate tendency for levels, quadrants, and separations—ironic for someone whose second book was entitled *No Boundary*. I proposed replacing Wilber's holons with Whiteheadian actual entities, thereby creating an organic flow between the "one and the many" capable of explaining both radical relationality and spatiotemporal individuality. Unlike Ferrer, I have found it extremely helpful to have a guiding metaphysics for clarifying issues such as this one.

In addition to an Introduction, Ferrer includes two Appendixes as well as a Postscript; the latter further updates his thought on the use of "undermined" instead of "indeterminate" when describing the Mystery, naturalism versus supernaturalism, and the issues of transcendence, immanence, and subtle worlds. The Appendixes examine through a participatory lens Almass' New Diamond Approach and S. Taylor's "soft perennialism." A

moving Coda, which offers a touchingly personal look into the author's own inspiration and motivation, is also included.

Any difficulties I experienced in discerning the full parameters of Ferrer's approach have nothing to do with his style or explication. He is an excellent and accessible writer who often employs an engaging first-person narration. Jorge's first-hand accounts of his own psychedelic experiences are refreshingly frank and stand in the good company of the classic writings of Michael Harner and the McKenna brothers (*The Way of the Shaman; The Invisible Landscape*; Harner, 1982; McKenna & McKenna, 1993). I think, rather, my difficulty in understanding exactly what Ferrer was up to at a deeper level is that, in an important way, he wants to leave that deep level up for grabs, as it were. Ferrer does not want to attach his participatory approach to any particular metaphysical system or cosmological vision to avoid privileging one system over another and effectively limiting transpersonal psychology's openness to the full range and richness of the multitude of "enactions of the Mystery" (i.e., "transpersonal experiences," in more common parlance).

In other words, the participatory approach is open to multiple metaphysical possibilities. Ferrer notes that there are two rather different meanings for "metaphysical": In philosophy, it is used to denote a deeper reality behind the appearances; in religion, it points to dimensions or worlds existing outside our everyday awareness (Ferrer, 2017). I would like to offer a third meaning that I think might hold importance for transpersonal psychology: metaphysics as "the description of the generalities which apply to all the details of practice" (Whitehead, 1929/1978, p. 13). Perhaps Ferrer neglects speculative philosophy's understanding of metaphysics because of a predisposition carried over from his perspective on the failure of past universalist attempts to articulate a single or unified Reality behind the appearances: "the search for a common core, universal essence, or single metaphysical world behind the multiplicity of religious experiences and cosmologies can be regarded as over" (Ferrer, 2017, p. 223).

Because CIIS has several Whiteheadian scholars of note—Brian Swimme and Matthew Segal come to mind immediately—it seems unlikely that Ferrer has not given at least some consideration to Whitehead's "speculative philosophy" approach. On the other hand, his tip of the hat to John Cobb and David Griffin's process theology, while more favorable than his appraisal of most other theories, suggests an underappreciation of the depth and possibilities of process theology—much less what process philosophy can contribute more broadly to transpersonal psychology. In his first book, Ferrer (2002) asserts that the "unifying feature of the transpersonal vision is its commitment to the epistemic value of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena" (p. 9). However, demonstrating *how* these kinds of phenomena may reveal real information about the universe, and where they fit into science and everyday life for that matter, would seem to require some sort of coherent explanation that meshes with these other realms, especially if we want to have productive conversations with the broader community of scholars, scientists, and laymen alike. Process philosophy offers exactly this kind of highly sophisticated epistemology and ontology, furnishing both a mode of access for transpersonal perception and a model for how real knowledge of the universe can arise from these direct intuitions of other events. More generally, a unifying theory like Whitehead's not only connects transpersonal psychology to science and everyday existence, it also provides grounding for regulative values—something central to Ferrer's understanding of both individual and shared spirituality—as well as a spiritually informed vision of reality and the cosmos. To use Ferrer's (2017) own metaphor—that he has borrowed from a cited Rumi quotation—transpersonal psychology needs roots *and* branches, that is, metaphysics and cosmology.

That said, the arguments articulated by Ferrer have prompted me to think deeply about my longstanding commitment to a Whiteheadian metaphysics, especially with regard to its importance for grounding and interpreting transpersonal psychology. While I continue to remain convinced of its usefulness, Ferrer's participatory approach has the merits of maximal openness and acceptance of all spiritual paths and phenomena within a very deep and broad pluralism; these characteristics are difficult to simulate within the bounds of any defined metaphysics or cosmology, even one as encompassing as Whitehead's. In questioning my dedication to process philosophy—or the deep allegiance of those enamored by Wilber's theories, or by any other powerful vision of reality—I am reminded of William James' (1909/1967) remark concerning an unfortunate tendency found in some of Hegel's more ardent followers: "Once dilated to the scale of the master's eye, the disciple's sight could not contract to any lesser prospect" (pp. 85–86). Thus, I find myself asking: Does transpersonal psychology really benefit from holding a particular metaphysical stance? Ferrer makes a strong case that it does not, both in the philosophical and religious senses.

This question immediately brings to mind several problems that arise with the participatory stance. For me, it remains unclear how Ferrer's undetermined "Mystery" avoids the "myth of the given," when all it really seems to accomplish is to substitute something "undetermined" for the more defined hidden realities of other systems. For if, as Ferrer (2002) asserts, there is an "ultimate unity of the Mystery" (p. 228), which is also an "indeterminate spiritual power" (pp. 151, 190), it appears we still more or less have a manifestation of the noumena-phenomena dichotomy that Ferrer so abhors. Even if one focuses primarily on the enaction of the Mystery, to highlight presence over interpretation, is not the "Mystery" still lurking as a given nonetheless? For Whitehead, "the given" is conceived as the *past universe* and its enaction is found in every momentary occasion's creative synthesis of past events. Since these new synthetic events *are* interpretations or perspectives on the past, I would argue that formalizing these naive enactive interpretations into systematic understandings should be a natural part of the transpersonal endeavor, whereas Ferrer seems to favor emphasizing the enactions themselves.

Second, I have to wonder if a completely open system like participatory spirituality has the philosophical resources to adequately address the many difficult questions and discriminations facing our highly interconnected, grossly unequal, and ecologically threatened world? For example, can a "global ethic" be crafted without a guiding vision and philosophy, that is, something beyond the global guidelines envisioned by Ferrer (2017) as arising out of humanity's spiritual past woven upon "contemporary interfaith interactions, comparative religious ethics, cross-cultural dialogue on global human rights, and cooperative spiritual inquiry" (pp. 238–239). I feel a bit of a fiend for calling into question what is so obviously a well-intentioned and well-conceived agenda. However, I fear the ecological crisis in all its manifestations and ramifications may not grant us the time for all those meetings and encounters between people of goodwill to sort out these important matters.

This brings us back to what I consider the most critical question: What roles should a metaphysics and cosmology play for transpersonal psychology? Whitehead (1929/1978) writes that the primary purpose of speculative philosophy is to fuse religion and science into "one rational scheme of thought" (p. 15). This goal seems especially relevant for transpersonal psychology, which one might describe as being at the very epicenter of this "fusion." This is no simple matter. As Ferrer seeks to demonstrate, complex and subtle discriminations are required to develop an adequate

understanding of the deeper structures of science and religion. Once again, this is where a metaphysics like Whitehead's is most helpful for making such evaluations and discernments. Furthermore, as the epicenter of that fusion between religion and science, is transpersonal psychology not called upon to do more than remain open to all participatory spiritual phenomena or grapple with spiritual narcissism? Might it not lead the way to, or at least make a significant contribution toward, a new cosmic vision for our global community that paves a path forward for all? Because the spiritual vision of Whitehead's cosmology is mostly found in his descriptions of the primordial and consequent natures of God—though the possibility for other spiritual entities and psychical powers and ways of knowing are inherent in his philosophy—transpersonal psychology is ideally positioned to flesh out the actual spiritual dimensions of this kind of cosmological vision. Perhaps Ferrer would find such a mission both sufficiently open in scope and grounded in spiritual values to accommodate the kind of participatory vision that he is articulating—or perhaps not. However, I wonder if it might be *close enough*, given the times we live in and the dangers we face.

In summary, *Participation and the Mystery* offers a scholarly yet highly readable critique of transpersonal psychology's epistemological and philosophical tendencies and biases, conscious and unconscious, and also sacrifices some of its sacred cows—gently but surely. It is impeccable in this regard. Ferrer's attempt to create a more open approach to transpersonal theory, methodology, and practice is also welcome and needed. His examples of what this might look like in a classroom, in the field, and in a workshop should prove of real interest to educators, researchers, and therapists alike. However, despite a finely argued position to the contrary, I remain convinced that some interpretive philosophical perspective and a metaphysical foundation are not only helpful, but also necessary, to fully and coherently think through the key issues being explored in this book, as well as for formulating the kind of vision for the future that humanity so badly needs. Whether such a philosophical foundation might become a full-fledged part of transpersonal psychology, or function more in a metapsychological role, I will leave the reader to ponder.

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