

A NEW BIRTH IN FREEDOM:
A (P)REVIEW OF JORGE FERRER'S
REVISIONING TRANSPERSONAL THEORY:
A PARTICIPATORY VISION OF HUMAN SPIRITUALITY

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Revolutions in human thought seldom take place in a single clean sweep. Whether in science or philosophy, religion or art, major advances always emerge in a particular context and with a specific historical background that deeply shape and even constrain the way they unfold. A paradigm shift will often be initiated by a distinct, extraordinary break from the past—a kind of declaration of independence—yet this initial breakthrough will retain from the old paradigmatic structure certain essential and usually unexamined assumptions that limit the success of the new vision.

These limiting assumptions held over from the past are, to use Erich Voegelin's term, like a mortgage imposed on the new paradigm by the historical circumstances of its origin. On the one hand, the retained principles make possible the paradigm revolution in the first place, since the intellectual climate and presuppositions of the time could not have successfully supported a more radical break all at once. Yet on the other hand, the unconscious holdover often weakens the power of the new paradigm and can even threaten to destroy it. Eventually, a crisis is reached. It may then happen that a second intervention will take place, a second conceptual breakthrough virtually as essential as the first, which will emancipate the original revolution from its unconscious limitations and allow the full paradigm shift to be realized.

We see this dramatic sequence in the classic case of the Copernican revolution. Copernicus's fundamental insight, that a more elegant and compelling cosmology could be conceived around a planetary Earth and a central Sun, was deeply constrained by his retaining the long-established ancient Greek assumption that the planets must move with uniform circular motion. This unquestioned principle forced Copernicus's system to have as much mathematical complexity as Ptolemy's, requiring the retention of various ad hoc epicyclic constructions in order to approximate the observed planetary positions. Even with these elaborate corrections, the heliocentric theory proved no more accurate than the old geocentric model in matching the empirical data. This was the situation for more than half a century until the arrival of Kepler, who was fully committed to the Copernican hypothesis yet willing to confront squarely the stubborn anomalies and ad hoc epicyclic complexities that undermined the theory's viability. Having ardently attempted to fit the most recent planetary observations into every possible hypothetical system of circles and epicycles he could devise, he was finally obliged to conclude that some other geometrical figure must be the true form of planetary orbits. By daring to step outside the ancient framework of assumptions about what could possibly be true, Kepler discovered that the observations precisely matched orbits that were not circular in shape but elliptical, sweeping out equal areas in equal time. Kepler thereby dispensed with all the inadequate epicyclic corrective devices of the Ptolemaic sys-

tem and brilliantly solved the ancient "problem of the planets" that had driven and riddled astronomical theory for 2000 years. By so doing, Kepler liberated the Copernican hypothesis from its unconscious fetters. Within a few months of the publication of Kepler's discovery, Galileo turned his telescope to the heavens, and the Copernican revolution proceeded on to its epochal triumph in the modern age.

We can now recognize a similar situation with respect to the paradigm shift initiated by transpersonal psychology. From its birth in the late 1960s with the seminal work of Abraham Maslow and Stanislav Grof, the transpersonal movement represented a profoundly liberating impulse, and in certain respects a revolutionary break from the past, within the field of psychology. Compared with the positivism and reductionism that had long dominated the field, transpersonal psychology's inclusion and validation of the spiritual dimension of human experience opened the modern psychological vision to a radically expanded universe of realities—Eastern and Western, ancient and contemporary, esoteric and mystical, shamanic and therapeutic, ordinary and nonordinary, human and cosmic. Spirituality was now recognized as not only an important focus of psychological theory and research but an essential foundation of psychological health and healing. Developing ideas and directions pioneered by William James and C. G. Jung, transpersonal psychology and theory began to address the great schism between religion and science that so deeply divided the modern sensibility.

But as the work of Jorge Ferrer now shows, the very circumstances of transpersonal psychology's origins, born as it was out of a modern science with philosophical roots in the Enlightenment, compelled the new field to build its theoretical structures and foundations on inherited principles that—while crucial for its immediate success—gradually revealed themselves to be acutely problematic in the long term. With modernity's focus on the individual Cartesian subject as the starting point and foundation for any understanding of reality, with the modern mind's pervasive assertion of the knowing subject's epistemic separation from an independent objective reality, and finally with the modern disenchantment of the external world of nature and the cosmos, it was virtually inevitable that transpersonal psychology would emerge in the form that it did: namely, with an overriding commitment to legitimate the spiritual dimension of existence by defending the empirical status of private, individual intrasubjective experiences of an independent universal spiritual reality. With modern cosmology's voiding of any intrinsic spiritual meaning or structure in the publicly accessible external universe, empirical validation of a spiritual reality had to be via private and intrasubjective experience. And since experience of the ultimate spiritual reality was regarded as one shared by mystics throughout the ages, such experience was, like scientific truth, independent of human interpretations and projections and empirically replicable by anyone properly prepared to engage in the appropriate practices. In turn, this consensually validated supreme reality was seen as constituting a single absolute Truth which subsumed the diverse plurality of all possible cultural and spiritual perspectives within its ultimate unity. This was the essential transcendent Truth in which all religions at their mystical core ultimately converged.

Transpersonal psychology's commitment to such an epistemology and ontology certainly also reflected the powerful legacy of modern humanism and the longer Western humanistic tradition, dating back to the Renaissance and earlier to ancient Greece, which exalted the sovereign value of the individual--of individual human experience, human potential, and self-actualization. Moreover, the expansive and intense private subjectivity of much psychedelic experience, a key factor in the philosophical transformation of a generation of transpersonal thinkers, played a critical role in strengthening transpersonal psychology's commitment to an inner empiricism.

Less obvious, though no less influential, was the great underlying drama of the modern Western self as it strove to emerge from its historical religious matrix, that is, to define itself autonomously and thus in some sense to disengage itself from Christianity, the dominant vessel of the West's spiritual impulse for the better part of two millennia. The leading figures in transpersonal psychology were all working within and reacting against a Western cultural tradition whose religious imagination had been deeply informed, and problematically dominated, by Christianity. The reasons for this tension were many and complex, but an antagonistic response—sometimes subtle, other times explicit—to the Judaeo-Christian legacy in the West was generally shared by the entire transpersonal community and the larger counterculture of which it was a part, and this in turn influenced and encouraged its immense attraction to the spiritual riches of the East. But beyond the explicitly spiritual and religious dimension of this attitude, all the leaders of the transpersonal movement shared the larger background of the Enlightenment's historical struggle with the Christian religion for dominance in the modern worldview.

The Enlightenment impulse to privilege the universal truth of an objective reality—an unambiguous independent truth that could be reliably confirmed by direct experience and the appropriate experimental procedures, that transcended the diversity of various cultural and personal perspectives, that cleansed the mind of all subjective distortions and superstitious delusions, that demystified reality of all mythological baggage and anthropomorphic projections—this overriding impulse had effectively served the modern project of freeing modern thought from the perceived constrictions of a dogmatic Christianity.

But transpersonal psychology was now motivated by the same impulse in a new quest, focused this time not on the nature of the material world but on the nature of spirituality: namely, to free spirituality from its previous obligatory association with the now increasingly relativized Christian religion, yet also to free spirituality from its negation by modern science while remaining true to scientific principles of empiricist testing and validation. In turn, this quest was deeply affected by the widespread encounter with various Asian mystical practices and perspectives, usually removed from their complex cultural contexts and emphasizing a contemplative goal of nondual transcendence. The combined result of these several factors was transpersonal theory's commitment to a "perennial philosophy" which, in essence, privileged the same kind of truth in the psychospiritual world that the rationalist Enlightenment had privileged with respect to the physical world: a pre-given, imper-

sonal, universal truth that was independent of all subjective and cultural interpretations and that could be empirically verified with appropriate methodologies employed by an appropriate community of investigators. This perennialist Truth was the highest truth, superior to all others. It was a Truth exclusively capable of including and defining all other truths.

In a sense, the pioneers and leading theorists of transpersonal psychology had two aims. They wished to legitimate their new discipline and the ontological status of spirituality in the eyes of empirical science, the dominant force in the modern worldview. Yet, equally, they sought to legitimate spirituality and their discipline in their own eyes, which required them to satisfy those standards and assumptions of empirical science that they themselves had internalized in the course of their own intellectual development.

The belief in a pre-given objective reality—whether spiritual or material—that could be empirically validated; the further conviction that this reality was ultimately single and universal, independent of the diversity of human interpretations, and that its deep structures could be described by progressively more accurate representations as the history of thought advanced; the corollary belief that, on this basis, sharply bivalent assessments, either affirmative or rejecting, could be made of all "competing" spiritual and psychological perspectives, and that hierarchical rankings of religious traditions and mystical experiences as more or less evolved could thereby be established according to their relative accuracy in representing this independent reality: All these principles, derived from the scientific ideology of modernity, were carried forth into the transpersonal paradigm. And in being carried forth, they at once helped legitimate the paradigm and yet increasingly began to engender internal tensions, theoretical incoherencies, and even internecine conflicts.

In practice--on the ground level, as it were, in its lived reality—the transpersonal world from the beginning was an extraordinarily embracing, tolerant, richly pluralistic community of seekers and scholars, students and teachers. The periodic large gatherings around the world of the International Transpersonal Association, founded by Grof in the 1970s, were exceptionally encompassing events, each one a combination of wide-ranging psychology conference, New Age cultural festival, and something resembling the World Parliament of Religions. Few gatherings could have been more fertilely dialogical. A similar ethos pervaded the ongoing seminars, symposia, and workshops at Esalen Institute, for many years an epicenter of the transpersonal world.

But at the theoretical level, in books, journals, and graduate classrooms, the most energetic and widely discussed conceptual frameworks in transpersonal theory were marked by an increasingly intense commitment to a single absolute universal truth, stringent bivalent logic, and the construction of all-subsuming metasystems that confidently rejected or affirmed particular spiritual traditions and philosophical perspectives according to specific abstract criteria and ranked them in ascending evolutionary sequences. This in turn brought forth increasingly heated controversies and conflicts, as representatives of an enormous range of diverse traditions and per-

spectives—indigenous and shamanic, esoteric and gnostic, Romantic and Neo-Romantic, Jungian and archetypal, feminist and ecofeminist, as well as Wiccan and Goddess spirituality, Buddhism, nature mysticism, Christian and Jewish and Islamic mysticism, anthroposophy, American Transcendentalism, deep ecology, systems theory, evolutionary cosmology, Whiteheadian process theology, Bohmian physics, and many others—all asserted the intrinsic worth of their positions against theoretical superstructures by which they felt marginalized, devalued, and misrepresented. The situation was further complicated by the fact that transpersonal psychology's own data—the findings of modern consciousness research, experiential therapies, psychedelic reports, spiritual emergencies, research in nonordinary states of consciousness, field anthropology, thanatology, the reports of mystics across diverse cultures and eras—suggested a far more complex picture than the leading theoretical systems could accommodate. By the 1990s, a kind of civil war had emerged, engulfing the field in controversy and schism.

It is this immensely complex and conflicted situation, in all its conceptual intricacy, that Jorge Ferrer's *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* brilliantly confronts, diagnoses, and recontextualizes. This is a profoundly liberating book. Ferrer has assimilated all the major works and ideas of the field and thought through the difficult issues at stake. He has integrated the most recent developments in fields that had heretofore been inadequately engaged by transpersonal theory—cross-cultural philosophy of religion, comparative mysticism, interreligious dialogue, hermeneutics and poststructuralism, post-Kuhnian philosophy of science—fields acutely relevant to the current debates. And perhaps especially important, Ferrer has deeply explored a range of transformative practices, spiritual paths, and spiritually informed social action that have brought crucial dimensions of embodiment to intellectual and spiritual issues.

I will leave it to the reader of his book to enjoy the unfolding drama of Ferrer's masterful analysis as he lays the groundwork to resolve the crisis of transpersonal theory. In essence, Ferrer has comprehended the most valuable insights of the postmodern mind and integrated them into the transpersonal vision while fully transcending the dogmatic relativism and compulsively fragmenting skepticism that afflicted some earlier postmodern perspectives (limitations rooted in that hidden secular reductionism which served as postmodernity's own unconscious mortgage to the modern). The underlying project of the leading transpersonal metatheories has explicitly been to integrate modern science with premodern religion. To achieve this, numerous ad hoc theoretical modifications were required to explain the many resulting anomalies and incoherencies, blunt the diverse criticisms, and patch up the attempted supersynthesis. These modifications usually drew on various postmodern ideas that were helpful for meeting the specific problems at issue but, in the long run, proved to be essentially epicyclic corrections for an overall strategy that could not do justice to the complex reality it sought to explain.

Ferrer, by contrast, has absorbed the full meaning of the postmodern turn at its deepest, irreplaceable core: He has articulated a radically *participatory* and *pluralistic* understanding of spiritual realities, spiritual practices, and spiritual knowledge. He

critiques the intrasubjective empiricism imported from empiricist science that has dominated the field and colonized it with inapt and self-defeating requirements for replication, testing, and falsification. And he affirms the validity of a multiplicity of spiritual liberations, in which various spiritual traditions and practices cultivate and "enact," bring forth, through cocreative participation in a dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power, a plurality of authentic spiritual ultimates.

With this crucial insight into the participatory, enactive, and pluralistic nature of spiritual truth, the transpersonal field frees itself to enter into a new world of openness to the Mystery of being that is its ground, accompanied by a newly respectful and fruitful dialogue between diverse religions, metaphysical perspectives, and spiritual practices. By cutting the Gordian knot that has invisibly bound transpersonal theory to the Enlightenment like an outlived umbilical cord, the transpersonal field can open to new horizons, its vision no longer so riven by futile, and too often intolerant, undialogical debate.

I salute Ferrer's emphatic affirmation of the Mystery with which all transpersonal and spiritual inquiry is concerned, the boundless creative freedom of the ultimate ground, its liberating defiance of all intellectual schemas that claim to theorize the whole of reality. And this affirmation is achieved, not simply by apodictic declaration, but by rigorous epistemological analysis of the relevant transpersonal theories, an equally meticulous comparison of cross-cultural religious and mystical reports, and an incisive critique of contemporary spiritual practice. It is a pleasure to see here a powerful mind employed fully in service to opening to the Mystery of existence rather than in attempting to contain, categorize, and rank, in service to the needs of an overarching system.

This is in many ways a very simple book. It is certainly extremely clear, written with an intelligent and patient care to make every point transparent to the reader, with every position at issue represented with conscientious accuracy, and with each possible objection or alternative lucidly addressed. Each successive chapter brings greater penetration into the field's central problems and greater freedom from the constraints of those problems. One finishes this book with a clearer mind and a more spacious vision than those with which one begins.

To engage transpersonal discourse at the level required to write this book, one must have done an incalculable amount of close reading and deep thinking, on an extremely broad range of topics and in a wide range of disciplines. And because it is this particular field, transpersonalism—Involving not only philosophy and psychology but spirituality and religion—there is an even greater potential in the process of such an accomplishment for spiritual inflation.

But Ferrer demonstrates in this book the very qualities of scholarship and dialogue that best reflect the character of his spiritual vision—the care with which he describes both his own positions and those of others, the openness to being corrected, the ability to be critical without sarcasm or rancor, the setting forth of opposing ideas in a manner that scrupulously reflects how their exponents themselves would

articulate them. Ferrer's consistent priority is clearly to seek and serve truth, rather than advance or preserve his own position and reputation at others' expense.

Transpersonal realities can never be adequately or accurately described by intellectually confident assessments and rankings of the multiplicity of humanity's spiritual paths and perspectives measured against a single pre-given universal Reality. Transpersonal realities can be approached, rather, only by a much more subtly intelligent and more heartful dialogical engagement with the Mystery that is the source of all—hence, by a dialogical engagement with each other in respectful openness to the diversity of wisdom's self-disclosures, and a dialogical engagement with one's interior being and with the cosmos itself in reverent openness to the irreducible depths of its mystery, intelligence, and power. Such knowledge is an act of the heart as much as it is an act of the mind, the two inextricably united.

We can perhaps now recognize that great temptation to which our field temporarily succumbed, seen in certain stages of the spiritual and intellectual quest, a temptation that any brilliant, spiritually informed mind may encounter: to attempt intellectually to master the Mystery, to overpower its power, to overcome its free spontaneity, to show how everything fits one's own system, to avoid the psychological fears and anxieties of confronting the larger Unknown, that which can never be mastered. Ferrer's book provides the theoretical matrix for honoring this recognition. It honors that Spirit which blows like the wind, "where it wills."

As the transpersonal field moves to an understanding of human spirituality as more profoundly encompassing and participatory, many have begun to see the very word "transpersonal" as needing to be addressed and perhaps fundamentally redefined. For as we integrate more fully the amplitude and immanence of the sacred, we better discern that spiritual power moving in and through the human person in all her and his living, embodied, situated specificity: psychological and physical, gendered, relational, communal, cultural and historical, ecological and cosmic. In this understanding, "*trans*" recovers its original Latin larger range of meanings—signifying not only *beyond* but also *across, through, pervading; so as to change, transform; occurring by way of*. Here, "transpersonal" multivalently acknowledges the sacred dimension of life dynamically moving beyond as well as within, through, and by way of the human person in a manner that is mutually transformative, complexly creative, opening to a fuller participation in the divine creativity that *is* the human person and the ever-unfolding cosmos. It is precisely this spiritual dynamism in the human person embedded in a spiritually alive cosmos that empowers, and challenges, the human community's participatory co-creation of spiritual realities, including new realities still to unfold.

If the founding works of transpersonal psychology by Maslow and Grof constituted its declaration of independence, then Ferrer's book may well be seen as its emancipation proclamation, its "new birth in freedom." For within this book, transpersonal theory is liberated from that mortgage to the past, those constraining assumptions and principles inherited from its origins in the Enlightenment and modern science. As revolutionary and profound a force as transpersonal theory has been over the

past three decades, it has in a fundamental way been working inside a conceptual box. It has been subtly constrained by epistemological and metaphysical blinders that have unconsciously restricted its vision, thereby engendering numerous seemingly irresolvable problems, distortions, and conflicts. Only with the recognition of these inhibiting assumptions could the full emancipatory potential of the original transpersonal breakthrough finally be fulfilled.

If I may draw again on the Copernican analogy, transpersonal theory in its first 30 years, after freeing itself from a kind of geocentric/egocentric materialist reductionism dominant in mainstream psychology, tended to constellate itself around the transcendent Sun of perennialism as the absolute and single fixed center of the spiritual universe. Only with time has it become apparent that we live in a much vaster, more interesting, radically pluralistic world, an omnicentered cosmos with innumerable suns and stars around which are constellated multiple universes of meaning. These meanings are not pre-given and objective but rather are participatively and co-creatively brought forth out of an indeterminate and dynamic matrix of spiritual mystery.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Ferrer for his courage in bringing forth this work, although in a sense it reflects the maturation of the entire field, of the wider transpersonal community. I stand in admiration before the magnitude and depth of thought and experience, dialogue and reflection that has taken place within the transpersonal field to permit the possibility of this work being written at the present time. For at a deep level, the transpersonal community itself has brought forth this book: As Ferrer would himself be the first and most enthusiastic to declare, it is not the work of one person—although we owe so much to the person who articulated it.

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