

Openness: Spirituality in a Process Psychology

A Paper by John Buchanan for the Wuhan Conference
on Science and Spirituality
October 2005

I. Introduction

In the modern Western world, the scientific study of spirituality has been a very low priority. The outstanding exception to this widespread scientific neglect of spiritual experience is the field of study known as transpersonal psychology. In this paper, I briefly outline the history of transpersonal psychology, and then discuss philosophical contexts for this field. Essentially, I put forward my belief that Whitehead's process thought offers the best philosophical foundation for an empirical study and understanding of spirituality.

II. Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology is an outgrowth of the humanistic psychology movement that gained prominence in the 1960s, especially in the United States and parts of Europe. Major theorists contributing to this emerging field included Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, and Abraham Maslow. Humanistic psychology was seen as a "third force" in psychology, responding to the perceived limitations in the approaches of psychoanalysis and behaviorism (the first and second forces), which tended to rely on pathological and experientially reductionistic models of the human being, respectively. Humanistic psychology, on the other hand, is interested in the *full potential* of the healthy, creative human being as revealed through the experiential complexities of everyday life. Thus humanistic psychology is also known as the "human potential movement."

By the later 1960s, even this humanistic perspective for psychology was recognized as being too narrow in light of new evidence. Maslow's work in "peak-experiences"—spontaneously occurring mystical or spiritual experiences involving a deeper or heightened appreciation of Being—led him to speculate that such experiences are an integral part of human nature. Maslow realized that an enlarged vision of the field of psychology was needed to

incorporate this spontaneous spiritual faculty. Coinciding with Maslow's work on peak-experiences were John Lilly's work in altered states of consciousness and Stanislav Grof's psychiatric studies involving psychedelics, as well as a more general interest in the mystical potential of these substances—classically described in Aldous Huxley's account, *The Doors of Perception*. These trends converged with new scientific and experiential efforts to understand the insights and psychospiritual methodologies behind the heightened states of consciousness described by the religions and philosophies of the Eastern world, as well as in Western mystical writings and the shamanic practices of traditional cultures.

According to Grof (*The Inner Door* 4), transpersonal psychology had its formal origin at a meeting in California in 1967. Attending that meeting were some pioneer thinkers including “Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich, Stanislav Grof, James Fadiman, Miles Vich, and Sonya Margulies.” Transpersonal psychology thus emerged as a “fourth force” in psychology with a mission to investigate human spirituality in its broadest expression, while trying to avoid the prejudgments and prejudices embedded in accepted cultural knowledge, including those of Western science.

The methodologies of transpersonal psychology have developed in response to the phenomena under study. While some subject matter, such as parapsychological phenomena, can to some extent be profitably studied through conventional scientific procedures involving controlled and repeatable experiments, phenomena such as nonordinary states of consciousness and mystical experiences are not amenable to strict control or repetition; they therefore need to be approached through subjective reporting, clinical observation methods, and other approaches more appropriate to the phenomena at hand. Much thought and research has gone into the development of such procedures. (*The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* provides an excellent resource for learning more about these methods and procedures. See the website for the Association for Transpersonal Psychology at: www.atpweb.org)

Generally speaking, transpersonal psychology investigates the significance and validity of spiritual experience and tries to understand its meaning and its implications for our world and our future. Its approach is broadly phenomenological, in that it is open to experience *as it presents itself*; its methodology is determined by what is most appropriate and effective for the phenomena being studied. Thus it is fully empirical: both in its subject matter and in its deference to the integrity of the experience itself.

Transpersonal psychology is not wedded to any particular philosophical position, including the strictures of Western science—especially the materialistic and mechanistic dimensions that can push modern science into scientism. In fact, transpersonal research has revealed serious flaws in any strictly deterministic or materialistic understanding of reality.

Finally, the empirical evidence uncovered by transpersonal psychology is (with due caution and rigor) considered to contain *real data* about the world in which we live. This evidence is not merely “subjective,” but can reveal important information concerning our universe and the nature of Reality.

III. Philosophy of Psychology

A field such as transpersonal psychology, which is deeply involved in investigating novel dimensions of reality and developing new methodologies attuned to these novel elements, is necessarily thrust into questions of philosophy, metaphysics, and cosmology. It also tends to seek a unifying framework within which to locate its new emerging worldview. Within transpersonal psychology, the two most prominent models of this kind are those of Ken Wilber and Stanislav Grof.

Wilber is a synoptic thinker who has attempted a grand synthesis including much of Eastern and Western thought, based on a developmental or evolutionary model of Consciousness’s journey from matter to Absolute Spirit. This evolutionary movement occurs both individually and collectively. While brilliant, and helpful in many ways, I believe Wilber’s theories tend to be so overly concerned with his many levels and dimensions of being that he obscures the essential relatedness of all entities. Furthermore, his notion of the Absolute is irrational in the negative sense of the term, and represents a too rigid understanding of the “great chain of being.” From my process perspective, most of the problems with Wilber’s theories can be rectified through a slight Whiteheadian turn in his metaphysics. But while his major metaphysical synthesis (found in *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality*) comes very close to Whitehead’s philosophy of organism, Wilber thus far refuses to take the final, but significant, steps into the Whiteheadian camp.

I have worked extensively with Grof—he was on my dissertation committee, and I have been trained in his *holotropic breathwork* technique—and I think very highly of his research and

theories. In short, Grof's *cartography of the human psyche* presents a unified picture of the human unconscious extending from the biographical unconscious, as delineated by Freud and his followers, into the perinatal realms surrounding the birth experience, as first described by Freud's student Otto Rank, and finally moving into the transpersonal realms of the unconscious, containing those depth phenomena found in Carl Jung's collective unconscious and in the religious, mystical, and shamanic traditions from throughout human history. Grof also has outlined a fascinating phenomenology of these "nonordinary" experiences, which was developed out of his extensive clinical psychiatric work with psychedelics, as well as from his public workshops that employ his nondrug methodology for inducing nonordinary states (i.e., "holotropic breathwork").

While Grof's theories provide a unified theory of the unconscious and nonordinary experience, for a more encompassing theory of the universe at large, including scientific knowledge, Grof now favors the theories of Ervin Laszlo. Interestingly, Laszlo, a physicist, did his dissertation on Whitehead. And when at a transpersonal conference I asked him about his relationship to Whitehead's work, Laszlo replied: "I am a Whiteheadian."

Furthermore, two of the three major psychological anticipators of transpersonal psychology also held a process orientation. Gustav Fechner, one of the founders of modern scientific psychology, in his later life developed a cosmology that included nature as *alive* and a theology that (according to Hartshorne and Reese) is very similar to Whitehead's own view. And William James, America's greatest psychologist, argued for a theory of experience and a theological cosmology that not only strongly resembles Whitehead's ideas in these areas, but upon which Whitehead constructed much of his own psychological position.

The outstanding exception to this Whiteheadian rule is Carl Jung, who was essentially a Kantian, philosophically speaking. It is this Kantian orientation, I believe, that leads to much of the confusion about, and within, Jung's theories. For it is extremely difficult to formulate coherent theories about the depths of reality when operating from a philosophical perspective whose starting point is the absolute unknowability of the true or depth nature of things-in-themselves. Actually, it is surprising that Jung has supplied transpersonal psychology with so many fruitful ideas and concepts, considering this problematic philosophical foundation.

My own belief is that transpersonal psychology, and the field of psychology generally, is best served by working explicitly within a Whiteheadian philosophical orientation. Such a move

offers many benefits, of which I will briefly mention only a few of the most important for a psychology of spirituality.

First of all, Whitehead's philosophy is specifically built upon the notion that its primary value arises from its ability to unite science and religion within one coherent metaphysical system: philosophy "attains its chief importance by fusing the two, namely, religion and science, into one rational scheme of thought." (PR 15) At its heart, process thought seeks a way of interpreting spiritual experience, in all its manifestations, that is at once scientifically *and* philosophically sound.

Secondly, Whitehead's philosophy is *empirical* in the broadest sense possible. It seeks to find a system of ideas capable of interpreting *all* experience. And *all* of reality is understood in terms of a metaphysically generalized notion of human experience. Experience is paradigmatic of reality. Thus spiritual experience is of primary importance for understanding ourselves and our world.

Thirdly, Whitehead's theory of experience describes a mode of perception, "causal efficacy," that provides a *direct means of access* to the world. Perception in the mode of causal efficacy, as the direct feeling of other entities in the universe, offers a mode of "nonsensory" perception underlying our everyday conscious sensory experience. This nonsensory intuition of reality forms the basis for a possible explanation for spiritual phenomena ranging from telepathy, to true empathic intuition, to mystical revelation. It also gives objective credibility to these phenomena by providing a coherent, realistic epistemology. In sum, Whitehead's theory of perception is encompassing enough to account for our everyday sensory experience of the world *and* for those special moments of conscious intuition and insight into a deeper spiritual reality pervading our universe.

At least three types of major spiritual experience are suggested by Whitehead's category of the ultimate: "The many become one, and are increased by one." (PR 21) First, "the many" is indicative of direct mystical insight into the multitude of real entities that comprise our universe. This may involve a perception of nature as sacred and interconnected—a central tenet of many pagan and "primitive" forms of worship. In today's world, this could be characterized as an enhanced awareness of ecological spirituality.

The “one” suggests Whitehead’s notion of the ultimate *actuality*: God, in its primordial and consequent natures. Here we find multiform mystical experiences of a living God as pure potential, as creative love and guidance, and as loving compassion and redemption.

Finally, the “many becoming one” points to the ultimate *reality* in Whitehead’s philosophy: “creativity.” Transpersonal perceptions into this ultimate creative process, characteristic of every occasion of becoming, provide direct insight into the fundamental nature of reality: all things flow from the past and are effortlessly recreated into a new moment of perfection, which disappears again into a new future even as it reaches its moment of attainment. This is the Buddhist insight into the Emptiness of things. It is also a sheer “openness” to things as they *are*.

This openness to the world—occurring primarily through enhanced perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy being successfully raised into conscious awareness—is the key to experiencing the vast array of spiritual possibilities available to humankind. Transpersonal psychology studies the experiences thus revealed, what they tell us about our universe and ourselves, and how to enhance and intensify authentic experiences of spiritual openness. Whitehead’s process philosophy provides a metaphysics for understanding how spiritual experiences occur and a cosmology for understanding what these spiritual experiences reveal.

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