

# ***TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY***

This commentary addresses transpersonal psychology as it applies particularly to the transcendent aspects of our human nature. Its intent is to highlight briefly how transpersonal psychology developed out of the philosophies and belief systems associated with ancient knowledge and wisdom. A few comments will follow regarding the personal insights gleaned while attempting to uncover a correlation among transpersonal concepts and personal spiritual peak experiences along a path towards embracing the forgotten aspects of myself and the accompanying struggles encountered.

Transpersonal psychology is an eclectic branch of study encompassing a broad spectrum of modalities and belief systems. This form of psychology is rooted in perennial philosophy and in the beliefs and practices of major world religions. Some of the terminology used to elaborate models for explaining human psychology is relatively new, yet other terminology is quite ancient. Transpersonal dialectic is applied to further the understanding and explanation of aspects of the human experience beyond the culturally accepted conventional realms of expectation and belief. Furthermore, transpersonal psychology offers understanding that can facilitate the integration of other aspects of our sense of self that include the mind, body, emotions, and sense of spirituality.

One ancient religious belief system with applied practices associated with the integration of the Self is Hinduism. A significant body of information exists in Sanskrit literature, for example, that elaborates on how individuals may acquire greater understanding of the universe as well as of themselves. Through various techniques, such as movement and breath work, and in conjunction with focused intent, one can begin to experience a gradual “fading away” of a felt schism between self and Self.

Similarly, in Buddhism, practicing techniques associated with developing mindfulness via The First Noble Truth, for instance, helps an individual to balance out the various elements within the mind-body-spirit system. A thorough understanding of the three marks of existence defined by anatta (absence of permanent identity), dukkha (suffering), and anicca (impermanence) reflect the continual flux of human existence. This leads an aspirant into a state of Nirvana or Liberation by causing his or her self-image to dissolve. In other words, connecting with the Higher Mind or the Self may be facilitated through insight into and observation of suffering and impermanence without attachment.

Many other ancient world religions have also served to help individuals harmonize the various facets of their sense of self. Even western religions such as Judaism and Christianity have served to assist individuals in mending their spiritual wounding and sense of separation through the practice of focused devotion to God and to humanity, for instance, religious doctrines form a large part of humanity's priceless legacy.

This perennial worldview represents the repository of wisdom and understanding. Its main precepts have been passed down throughout time, and it knows no cultural boundaries. It is a recurring body of thought, yet at the same time, it is open ended. Primary recurring themes include the unity of all life, the all-pervasiveness of the Absolute, and the multi-dimensionality of existence.

The portion of the "wisdom of the ages" addressed by western speculative philosophy has produced a number of insightful treatises on the nature of consciousness and reality. Though these speculative doctrines are geared more towards conceptual understanding than on incorporating body-based practices, they have been useful and have served to help mitigate confusion and orient the spiritual traveler and seeker of Truth.

Western-based metaphysical concepts serve as cognitive points of reference to demarcate the evolutionary processes as well as the inter-relationship between the so-called "higher" and "lower"

aspects of reality. The limits of knowledge via one's faculty of reason have been extensively mapped in major epistemological works to address human consciousness dynamics as well.

The collective work of western intellectual discourse has served as one of many beacons that light the path of those aspirants who seek conceptual rectification and the comprehension of reality, at least in part, through the reasoning processes. Philosophical treatises originating in Hellenic Greek culture (though influenced by Eastern mysticism) have gradually been the subject of expansion among thinkers throughout time. Plato's dialogues, the teachings of Zeno of Elea, Heraclitus, and Parmenides, and of course Aristotle are just a few of the individuals who enriched the collective philosophy.

A tremendous amount of additional speculative thought came out of the enlightenment period of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature inspired Kant's rebuttal discourse, The Critique of Pure Reason, which is perhaps one of the most influential works of the last two hundred years. The Critique motivated Schiller, Fichte, Hegel, and Schopenhauer, among others, to seek to deduce and/or somehow explain the nature of "the thing in itself" as elaborated on in that epistemological work.

Kant's works also inspired innovators in both theoretical sciences and grounded disciplines related to governance and morality. The fields of organized thought that drew influence from him include those branches of knowledge associated with mathematics, political science, ethics, psychology, and physics. In his article, The Kantian Grounding of Einstein's Worldview, Stephen Palmquist writes, "Recent perspectival interpretations of Kant suggest a way of relating his epistemology to empirical science that makes it plausible to regard Einstein's theory of relativity as having a Kantian grounding."

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, “applied metaphysicians” referred to as psychologists were striving to come up with ways to synthesize the vast body of both conceptual as well as practical knowledge acquired over the centuries. Their intention was not merely to develop systems in order to understand or explain the psyche. There was a much greater desire to find ways to facilitate the alignment of one’s thoughts, feelings, and physical needs with their sense of spirituality.

Psychology began to take shape during the twilight years of speculative philosophy when grand unifying systems of thought were on the decline. A new science of mind and behavior was developing, and some of the pioneers in this field sought to ground various aspects of religious practice and metaphysical thought into a coherent modality that dealt with the individual’s transpersonal parts.

These new modalities were generated in part to facilitate the integration of the spiritual Self and personality self through addressing aspects of the contradiction between archetype awareness through transcendent experiences and everyday normal waking consciousness experiences. The term *transpersonal psychology* was created to describe a collection of concepts and techniques for comprehending and dealing with aberrant behavior, phobias, and general neurosis of all kinds from an augmented or interdimensional perspective. This orientation included acknowledging one’s connection, or the potential to do so, to a higher power. It also emphasized that emotional wounding did not necessarily have origins in developmental psychology or traumatic event causation. The personal experiences of psychic wounding were also related to a collective consciousness shared by all as well as to the transpersonal origins or wounding occurring beyond a present-day life identification and set of experiences.

One early pioneer in the field of transpersonal psychology was Roberto Assagioli. This Italian psychiatrist, who studied for a while with both Freud and Jung, developed a system called psychosynthesis. Psychosynthesis is a holistic approach to human development that incorporates the

paranormal and mystical elements propounded in the perennial worldview and ancient religious beliefs.

Assagioli wanted to make clear from the beginning that, though his system addressed aspects of both the personal self as well as the transpersonal Self, there was actually only one consciousness, that of the Self or soul. One statement regarding his position on this matter is reflected in a quote in the work of Frager and Fadiman (1998)

The fact that we have spoken of the ordinary self and the profounder Self must not be taken to mean that there are two separate and independent 'I's, two beings in us. The Self in reality is one. What we call the ordinary self is that small part of the deeper Self that the waking consciousness is able to assimilate in a given moment.... It is a reflection of what can become ever more clear and vivid, and it can perhaps someday succeed in uniting itself with its source.

Assagioli felt that the purpose of psychosynthesis was to further the process of evolution, and in so doing, to achieve a joining of the parts of an individual's personality into a more cohesive self. To the degree that this took place, one could function in a way that was more life-affirming and authentic.

The "Egg" Diagram is one popular schematic used to illustrate the various components of the self. It is made up of 7 sections: (1) The Lower Unconscious, (2) The Middle Unconscious, (3) The Higher Unconscious or Superconscious, (4) The Field of Consciousness, (5) The Conscious Self or "I", (6) The Higher Self, and (7) The Collective Unconscious. Each of the elements represents an area within the awareness of an individual that needs to be integrated or synthesized into their being. Becoming aware of the various disparate elements is not enough to achieve wholeness, however. The process is very experiential and involves delving into emotional wounding, for example.

Abraham Maslow is another prominent transpersonal psychologist and theoretician in history and served as one of the pioneers of the self-actualization movement. Based on his investigations into

human behavior, Maslow suggested five sets of goals that may be called basic needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization or self-fulfillment.

Maslow's model, in essence, is a transpersonal system for the process of attaining self-actualization or self-fulfillment that involves integrating or amalgamating the different elements associated with experiencing life in a human body and limiting one's sense of personal self. His system is hierarchical in that lower needs must be fulfilled before higher ones can be. According to an interpretation of his model presented in one Internet article (1998):

Man's basic needs are physiological, for example, hunger, thirst, and sleep. When these are satisfied, they are replaced by safety needs reflecting his desire for protection against danger or deprivation. These in turn, when satisfied, are replaced by the need for love or belonging to, which are functions of man's gregariousness and his desire to belong to a group, to give and receive friendship and to associate happily with people. When these needs have been satisfied, there is the esteem needs, i.e., the desire for self-esteem and self-respect, which are affected by a person's standing reputation, and his need for recognition and appreciation. Finally, individuals have a need for self-actualization or a desire for self-fulfillment, which is an urge by individuals for self-development, creativity, and job satisfaction.

This discussion is incomplete without mention of Ken Wilber, who sought to synthesis wisdom from various Eastern- and Western-based paradigms in order to create a comprehensive worldview to serve as the foundation for his own transpersonal views and proposal for an integral psychology model.

In The Spectrum of Consciousness, Wilber states that growth is defined as a healing of a series of dichotomies within the individual. There is a kind of spiritual descending into unconsciousness and ascending back into unity – a sort of Outward Arc followed by an Inward Arc. In Wilber's own terms (1980):

The story of the Outward Arc is the story of the Hero – the story of the terrible battle to break free of the sleep in the subconscious... The story of the Outward Arc is also the story of the ego, for the ego is the Hero... But the Outward Arc, the move from sub-consciousness to self-consciousness, is only half of the story of the evolution of consciousness... Beyond the self-conscious ego, according to mystic-sages, lies the path return and the psychology of eternity – the Inward Arc.

Some individuals, like me, have spent a greater portion of their life seeking ways to integrate various disparate parts of themselves. Like many, I too have experienced spiritually emergent events in my life. Periodic episodes of “breaking through” constricting limits of my experiential sense of self have awakened in me a desire for greater understanding and for access to other parts of my consciousness. Personal experiences have served to inspire and motivate me to search out ways of sustaining the expansive, all-inclusive awareness and sense of unity perceived.

Unfortunately, a spiritual peak experience is a state and not a structure of consciousness. Though insight into the nature of my Self is made apparent by transcendent and evanescent expansive experiences through direct apperception, grounding those insights with structures (i.e., through relationships in the phenomenal realm and in everyday life) is complex and arduous. The probability of success in time presents as dubious, limited, and conditioned by the physical, emotional, and relational barriers and conflicts encountered during everyday life engagement. Additionally, interference from insecurities, peccadillos, fears, distorted beliefs, and contradictions in mind and mood as evidenced by our behavior all serve as nemeses, either separately or collectively.

To illustrate this idea, throughout my late teens and early twenties, I strove to fathom the profundity of early-life transcendent experiences via the faculty of reason. I read incessantly for years. Unfortunately, the perennial doctrines provided me only with some insight and orientation. They did

not offer me much practical knowledge on how to integrate my mind-body-heart or address my personal nemeses.

I may have confidence in the idea of unity that abides within as a consequence of a peak experience. Yet, a structure is required to house that awareness and ground it through experiences that produce a sense and feeling at ease in mind and mood. In essence, a depository of notions housed in waking consciousness is not commensurate to a home filled with awareness, love, warmth, permission, and joy.

Conceptual understanding may be a portal through which to orient oneself cognitively with the immensity of the characteristics of the Soul. It may provide individuals like me with a compass and a map showing the direction in which to move. However, more is required to integrate insights derived through books and/or emotional catharsis obtained through spiritual peak experiences.

The path and process of integration require due diligence, vigilance, humility, gratitude, determination, and compassion for self and others. Transpersonal psychology provides a lattice on which to hang our beliefs and ideas and to design intervention strategies (“try-outs”) to see if they facilitate our moving closer to a felt experience of Self and the Universe.

One helpful metaphor is one expounded by Ralph Metzner in The Unfolding Self, referred to as the “caterpillar-to-butterfly” metaphor. He asserts that everyone is capable of spiritual metamorphosis. Latent potential lies in wait to be actualized in each of us, not only in our waking cognitive consciousness, but perhaps more significantly in our feelings and bodily sensations. The conundrum is finding the right key(s) to removing the barriers keeping us from experiencing a greater sense of wholeness in mind, mood, and body. The essence of the Divine (the Butterfly) resides at the core of our being, pure and undiluted. As humans (caterpillars), we are relatively impotent. We often feel

separated from Source, segregated and shielded from “All That Is” by the cocoon constructed out of our physical limitations, emotional wounding, and crystalized limiting beliefs.

Many of us have perceived a glimmer of the vastness that exists within, and we have experienced evanescent expansive moments through forgetting self. Further actualization or transformation into the Butterfly has been hindered for many of us. Parts of ourselves hold fast to the limitations with and through which we identify. We dare not break free of our prison cells for fear of becoming disoriented and lost to something unfamiliar, uncontrollable, and frightening. Precepts embodied by transpersonal psychologists address our inner yearning for wholeness through connection, intra- and inter-relating experiences, and the act of finding and fulfilling purpose and meaning of life, or for that matter, each significant situation encountered.

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