

Embracing metaphysics in transpersonal psychology: A response to Steve Taylor

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*Steve Taylor's review of the new edition of my book *Shadow, Self, Spirit* (2021) focuses on a critique of what he sees as my 'sceptical' stance on metaphysics and my rejection of his own 'soft perennialism'. I respond to Taylor's criticisms by noting (1) that my own perspective rejects materialism and acknowledges the need for metaphysical concepts in transpersonal psychology; (2) that, in researching transpersonal phenomena, researchers should aim to bracket metaphysical assumptions and should prefer non-metaphysical explanations where these are sufficient. I expand upon and clarify my criticisms of soft perennialism and argue that Jorge Ferrer's participatory theory offers a more productive approach to understanding metaphysics, the varieties of spiritual experience, and religious pluralism.*

Keywords: *Metaphysics, perennialism, participatory theory.*

First, I would like to thank Steve Taylor for his lengthy review (Taylor, 2021) of the new edition of *Shadow, Self, Spirit* (Daniels, 2021), and for his generous introductory comments about the book as a whole. Taylor devotes the greater portion of his review, however, to a critique of my stance on metaphysics and, in particular, to my rejection of his own proposal that transpersonal psychology should adopt a 'soft perennialist' position which proposes that 'the fundamental reality of the universe is an all-pervading spiritual essence' or 'all-pervading spiritual force' (Taylor, 2021, p. 70) – a 'non-material essence of some form, whether we refer to it as spirit, mind or consciousness' (ibid., p. 72).

Taylor (ibid., p. 63) begins his defence of soft perennialism by suggesting four reasons why transpersonal psychology must reject materialist philosophy and replace it with some form of 'post-materialist' position:

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.

What Taylor fails to recognize at this point in his discussion is that I do not essentially disagree with these statements, and that I make clear my own rejection of materialism. For example, I point out that '[p]erhaps the only widely-accepted philosophical position among transpersonalists is the rejection of an entirely materialistic worldview (Daniels, 2021, p. 264n.169). I include myself in this and, while I do not specifically refer to the need for a 'post-materialistic' philosophy, I do not object to the use of this terminology to represent my position.

However, while I agree with Taylor on the need for transpersonal psychology to embrace a post-materialistic perspective, I do not accept that the discipline should commit itself to his own 'soft perennialist' metaphysics.

What is metaphysics?

The term 'metaphysics' can mean different things, and confusion can arise when the term is not used consistently. Taylor's critique of my own metaphysical position seems to conflate, or shift between, two distinct meanings:

1. 'Metaphysics is the area of philosophy that deals with questions about the fundamental nature of reality, and of human existence and human nature' (Taylor, 2021, p. 65). Accordingly, 'conventional materialism is a metaphysical worldview in that it consists of a number of assumptions about reality and human nature' (ibid., p. 65).
2. Metaphysical realities as those that exist *beyond* the physical/natural realm (i.e., literally '*meta*-physical'). In this sense, the material world is, by definition, NOT metaphysical. Taylor acknowledges this alternate meaning when, for example, he argues that 'attempts by Hartelius and Friedman and others to create a metaphysics-free naturalistic form of transpersonal psychology are unlikely to be successful' (ibid., p. 71).

I contend that, within transpersonal circles, the term 'metaphysical' generally refers to (2) rather than (1). Indeed, Taylor agrees on this point, noting that '[s]ince its inception, transpersonal psychology has traditionally been affiliated with a post-materialist outlook, assuming the existence of metaphysical phenomena such as consciousness and spirit' (ibid., pp. 70-71).

Because of the confusion that can exist between these two quite distinct interpretations, I prefer to use the terms 'ontology' or 'ontological' for (1), and 'metaphysics' or 'metaphysical' for (2).

Throughout this book I use the term *metaphysical* to refer to realities that are presumed to exist beyond the material and psychological realms. I accept that metaphysics is often taken to refer to philosophical consideration of the nature of reality (which can include realm of matter). In my opinion, however, questions about what is real are better characterized as *ontological* rather than metaphysical. Accepting this distinction will, I believe, help to avoid some of the semantic confusion that can occur within transpersonal discourse. (Daniels, 2021, p. 206n.134, italics in original)

On metaphysical bracketing

Clarifying the distinction between ontology and metaphysics helps to unpack Taylor's criticism of my call for 'metaphysical bracketing' within transpersonal psychology. I characterize such metaphysical bracketing in these terms:

transpersonal psychologists ... should aim to bracket, as far as possible, ALL metaphysical assumptions in pursuit of a phenomenological and hermeneutic exploration of experiences of transformation, or of transcendence in the broad sense ... a radically scientific and hermeneutic transpersonal psychology should ... NOT be *based on*, or commit itself, to any *pregiven* metaphysical beliefs, doctrines or practices (whether Buddhist, Vedantic, Neoplatonist, Theosophical, Christian, Kabbalistic, or whatever). (Daniels, 2021, pp. 224, 228-29, italics in original)

It should be clear from this that my primary purpose in advocating metaphysical bracketing is to prevent transpersonal psychology from becoming a religion, ideology, or cult that identifies itself with any *particular* metaphysical credo. Rather, it should remain broadly scientific, investigative, and open to multiple interpretive possibilities. At the same time, transpersonal psychology cannot be entirely materialist in its outlook but must acknowledge *some* metaphysical reality beyond the material realm. I therefore fully agree with Taylor's suggestion 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' (Taylor, 2021, p. 63).

I hope that this clarifies any misapprehension that, by advocating metaphysical bracketing, I am seeking to align myself with Harris Friedman's or Glenn Hartelius's rejection of ALL metaphysical concepts in the pursuit of a transpersonal psychology that is exclusively empirical and naturalistic (e.g., Friedman, 2002, 2013; Hartelius, 2017a). Indeed, although I sympathize with the strategic

intent behind Friedman's and Hartelius's scientific agenda, I have specifically argued against their positions on metaphysics (e.g., Daniels, 2021, pp. 205-07, 227n.150, 267).¹ Of course, this does not mean that transpersonal psychology cannot also incorporate naturalistic and psychological explanations that do not require a metaphysical interpretation. Indeed, I have argued that we should generally *prefer* explanations that make the fewest metaphysical assumptions – a principle I refer to as 'metaphysical minimalism' (ibid., p. 229).

On 'soft perennialism'

Although I agree with Taylor that transpersonal psychology cannot avoid metaphysics, I do not accept that the discipline should adopt his doctrine of soft perennialism. The central claim of soft perennialism (e.g., Taylor, 2016, 2021) is that all mystical experiences and processes of spiritual 'awakening' involve an 'expansion of awareness' that represent different glimpses or interpretations of a common (perennial and universal) transcendent reality. This reality, for Taylor, is an all-pervading non-material essence or force 'variously described as mind, consciousness or spirit' (Taylor, 2021, p. 70). Soft perennialism, he argues:

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 of near-death experiences. (Taylor, 2021, p. 69)

While Taylor has coined the *term* 'soft perennialism'², the *concept* itself is not new. Its central tenet, i.e., that there is a universal experiential and doctrinal core to all religions, can be found in

¹ Taylor (2021, p. 65) acknowledges that my position on metaphysics contrasts with that of Friedman and Hartelius, yet he continues to decry what he describes as my 'sceptical attitude' towards metaphysics. I would simply point out here that bracketing is not the same as scepticism.

² Taylor distinguishes soft perennialism from the 'hard' perennialism that claims the universal and exclusive truth of a particular religious or spiritual tradition. While hard perennialism may characterize certain fundamentalist religions, it has never been an accepted position within transpersonal psychology. For that reason, 'soft perennialism' is, in my opinion, essentially equivalent to perennialism as generally understood within the discipline.

Unitarianism, 19th century American Transcendentalism, and Theosophy. Fully articulated by Aldous Huxley in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1947), the idea once dominated transpersonal psychology, notably through the work of Ken Wilber.

While I accept that common features can be identified among certain transpersonal experiences (both religious and secular) as well as among concepts found across various spiritual traditions, I have several reservations about Taylor's claim that these commonalities imply a soft perennialist metaphysics (see also the critiques of soft perennialism by Ferrer, 2017, pp. 263-272; Hartelius, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). In particular, I would point out that:

1. Although commonalities among experiences or spiritual doctrines may be *consistent with* soft perennialism, they do not establish it (other explanations are possible).
2. Taylor's research on 'awakening' (e.g., Taylor, 2017) could be influenced by selection bias and confirmation bias, such that his examples and interpretations have been made to fit preconceived metaphysical notions. Taylor himself argues that it is impossible to prevent one's own views from biasing research (Taylor, 2021, p. 67).
3. In focussing only on commonalities, the notion of a 'perennial philosophy' can result in a failure to acknowledge important differences among spiritual experiences, perspectives, and traditions.
4. In describing the 'all-pervading' essence or force as mind, consciousness, or spirit, soft perennialism represents a continuation of the *idealist* tradition within Western and Eastern philosophy. As such, it prioritizes mental experience and reinforces the dualisms of mind vs. body, intellect vs. emotion, and conscious vs. unconscious.
5. The idealism of soft perennialism supports an essentially *ascending* and *individualist* path of transformation that seeks personal experiences of 'awakening' or 'enlightenment', and the cultivation of one's own mental/spiritual faculties through practices such as meditation. It tends to ignore or demote the need for psychotherapeutic work on the 'shadow' as well as failing to explicitly recognise spiritual paths based on care and service to other people or the environment – i.e., what I have referred to as the *descending* and *extending* vectors of ego-transcendence (see Daniels, 2021, chap. 2).³ To be fair, Taylor's description of 'awakening' does incorporate 'a movement beyond separateness and towards connection and union ...

³ Taylor (2021, p. 65) argues that the distinction I make between ascending and descending processes is 'too sharp' and that '[t]here is no need to think in terms of going up or down'. However, this entirely misses the point of my vector model of transpersonal development (Daniels, 2021, chap. 2) which clearly argues that we should seek to incorporate and *integrate* all three vectors (ascending, descending, and extending).

and a movement towards increased empathy, compassion, and altruism' (Taylor, 2021, p. 66) but this seems to be understood as a *consequence* of spiritual awakening rather than as a valid spiritual practice in its own right.

6. In his emphasis on 'the cultivation of inner stillness and emptiness' (ibid., p. 66), there is an inherent bias in Taylor's soft perennialism towards 'cool' rather than 'hot' spiritual traditions (after Rawlinson, 1997, 2000). Or, as Ferrer (2017, p. 270) puts it: 'Taylor's association of the experience of the universal spiritual force with both pure consciousness and apophatic union favors monistic and formless spiritualities over theistic and visionary ones'.
7. For all these reasons, soft perennialism cannot, in my opinion, provide the foundation for a truly *integral* model of spiritual transformation.

Metaphysical smuggling

I stand by my assertion that Taylor is (perhaps unwittingly) smuggling in a *particular* metaphysical ideology (together with its soteriological implications) under cover of a mistaken belief and claim that this ideology is universal and perennial. Furthermore, he seems to suggest that the only alternatives to soft perennialism are either hard perennialism or materialism – a suggestion that fails to appreciate the richness, diversity, sophistication and nuance of philosophical positions and theory within transpersonal psychology. The pragmatism of William James, Carl Jung's analytical psychology, Stan Grof's holotropic theory, Michael Washburn's spiral-dynamic approach, Jorge Ferrer's participatory theory, the transpersonal feminism of Peggy Wright, Viktor Frankl's logotherapy – none of these, in my opinion, can meaningfully be characterized as supporting soft perennialism (or hard perennialism, or materialism).

More importantly, the value of these multiple theoretical approaches lies precisely in their variety, and in what each of them uniquely contributes towards enriching our understanding of transpersonal experience and development. The same can also be said of the world's spiritual traditions – their uniqueness, richness and depth, and the differences between them, are, I suggest, more interesting and significant than any summary common denominator that they may be thought to share.

On spiritual pluralism

A problem for all scholars of religion and mysticism is how to account intelligibly for the varieties of spiritual experiences and traditions. Three basic explanations have been attempted:

1. The *perennialist* view that there is an essential unity among spiritual experiences and traditions, and that differences can be explained as different *interpretations* of a universal experience and reality. This is Taylor's position.
2. The *contextualist* or *constructivist* view that there are no spiritual universals and that differences among experiences and traditions can be fully accounted for by considering personal, environmental, social, and cultural factors (e.g., Gimello, 1978, 1983; Katz, 1978).
3. The *participatory* view that spiritual experiences, traditions, *and their associated metaphysical realities* are cocreated through human encounters and engagements with an indeterminate spiritual power or transconceptual 'mystery' (e.g., Ferrer, 2002, 2017). The participatory perspective differs from perennialism because differences among experiences and traditions do not simply reflect different *interpretations* of the *same* reality but are themselves distinct spiritual cocreations. The participatory approach also differs from strict contextualism or constructivism because, although spiritual experiences and traditions are influenced by personal, environmental, social, and cultural contexts, they are also conditioned and constrained by the transcendent 'mystery'. For this reason, authentic spiritual cocreations will exhibit certain recognisable qualities (notably, for Ferrer, a liberation from self-centredness).

Each of these approaches faces certain challenges. For perennialism, the challenge is to explain why spiritual experiences and traditions vary so much – e.g., why is near-death experience so different from mindfulness? Why do Buddhism and Christianity disagree about the existence of God? The challenge for contextualism is to explain cross-cultural similarities – e.g., why are reports of near-death experiences so consistent? Why do love and selflessness feature so prominently in both Buddhism and Christianity?

On participatory metaphysics

Ferrer's participatory approach offers a potential bridge between perennialism and contextualism. However, its language and concepts (e.g., cocreation, 'the mystery', 'ocean of emancipation') are not the easiest to grasp and they can appear vague and jargonized to many readers and commentators.

Taylor criticises Ferrer's concept of the 'mystery' as an example of 'bad metaphysics since it is so vague and general ... so vague that it is almost meaningless' (Taylor, 2021, p. 68). For Ferrer, however, the concept is intentionally vague (as Taylor himself concedes) precisely because metaphysical realities only become *concrete* when they are *cocreatively enacted* through human participation with this indefinable and indeterminate mystery. Again, Taylor understands this point but simply disagrees with it – asking: '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' (ibid., p. 68).

I am not sure what kind of evidence Taylor would accept, although his own preference seems to be the extent to which reported spiritual experiences and/or religious doctrines are consistent with a particular metaphysical position. In my opinion, for the reasons I have outlined, this evidence does NOT support Taylor's soft perennialism and the many *varieties* of spiritual experiences and religious doctrines would appear more consistent with a contextualist/constructivist perspective. Although Taylor argues that these varieties simply represent different post-hoc *interpretations* of experiences of the *same* spiritual essence or force, we should rightly ask: Why, then, are these interpretations often so different?

A more fundamental objection to both contextualism/constructivism and soft perennialism is that neither approach fully respects the integrity of any religion. In arguing that religious concepts are socially constructed, the contextualist approach effectively denies all metaphysical realities. For soft perennialism, any system of religious belief is an (essentially partial or distorted) *interpretation* or *view* of something more fundamental (the all-pervading essence or force). Therefore Allah, Brahman, Dao, En Sof, Yahweh, etc. do not exist as actual spiritual realities, and no *particular* religion can claim that its metaphysical concepts are true. Indeed, Taylor tips his attitude to religion when he argues that mystical experiences can suffer '*interference* from a religious ... background' (Taylor, 2021, p. 66, italics added).

Participatory theory offers a radical alternative to both perennialist and contextualist/constructivist approaches that avoids pitting *universal* metaphysics against *no* metaphysics and that is more appreciative and respectful towards different religious doctrines and practices. This participatory alternative proposes that the specific metaphysical realities claimed by different religions are themselves *cocreated* within those traditions and become real through a process of *spiritual enactment*.

Now, a critic might ask: What exactly is the difference between arguing that religious ideas represent (a) different culturally-situated *interpretations* of a universal spiritual force and (b) different culturally-situated *cocreations*, enacted through our participation with a 'shared spiritual ground' (Ferrer, 2002, p. 190)? Taylor implies there is no essential distinction, and he follows Abramson (2015) in arguing that 'participatory philosophy is actually a form of perennialism' (Taylor, 2021, p. 68).

Yet, while the two positions may appear superficially aligned, they diverge in at least three important ways:

1. Perennialism argues for the essential unity of all religions. Participatory theory argues for religious diversity.
2. Perennialism proposes that the all-pervading spiritual essence or force is definable and fixed. Participatory theory understands the shared common ground, or 'mystery' to be indefinable and indeterminate.
3. For perennialism, the only true metaphysical reality is the all-pervading spiritual essence or force. Participatory theory contends that, in addition to the meta-metaphysical reality of the 'mystery', other *particular* metaphysical realities can be cocreated through spiritual enactments. For participatory theory, therefore, Allah is real, Brahman is real, Dao is real – they are not merely cultural interpretations of something more fundamental.⁴

This last claim is bold and may seem extraordinary. It is often said that 'extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence' (after Sagan, 1979, p. 62) and it is therefore right that Taylor asks what evidence there may be for Ferrer's belief in metaphysical cocreation? While such evidence may not be compelling, it is not entirely absent. Perhaps the most obvious support comes from religious people's own direct experience of their God(s) or Goddess(es), or other spiritual entities (e.g., angels, *dakinis*), metaphysical realms (e.g., Heaven, the 'Pure Land', *bardos*), or principles (e.g., Dao, 'Enlightenment Mind'). If Taylor is content to accept experiential data as *indirect* evidence for an 'all-pervading spiritual essence or force' why should he not accept the more *direct* evidence that some people experience Christ or Avalokiteshvara?

That such metaphysical cocreations may be ontologically real (in the sense that, once cocreated, they can have an independent existence) is, according to Ferrer (2017), potentially supported by at least two important sources of evidence:

1. **Shared visions** – occasionally reported by two or more participants in psychedelic and other holotropic states. Also, there is related evidence from parapsychological research of collective apparitions (e.g., Hart, 1956; Tyrrell, 1942/1961). Such shared experiences lead us to consider seriously whether an external reality is being collectively perceived (see, for example, Ferrer, 2017, pp. 64-68).

⁴ Ferrer (2017) also accepts the possibility that some metaphysical entities may NOT be cocreated, but may be independently self-existent. Thus, he proffers that 'autonomous, nonhuman entities composed of energy and consciousness may exist, as well as participate in the cocreation of subtle worlds' (p. 228).

2. **Extra-cultural intrusions** – experiences of culturally-specific archetypal imagery or insights by people who have no prior knowledge of the culture or its religious motifs. Stan Grof reports, for example, that, during holotropic sessions, ‘people unfamiliar with the Kabbalah had experiences described in the Zohar and Sepher Yetzirah ... Others were able to describe the meaning and function of intricate mandalas used in the Tibetan Vajrayana and other tantric systems’ (Grof, 1988, p. 139, cited in Ferrer, 2017, p. 185).

Considered more broadly, the idea of metaphysical cocreation is neither new nor particularly remarkable. It is a fundamental assumption in ritual magic (e.g., evocation, conjuration, the casting of spells), in the *golem* myth, as well as in petitionary prayer and meditation practices such as *metta* (loving-kindness) and *tonglen* (giving or receiving).

On transpersonal science

I wish, finally, to address what readers may see as a contradiction or inconsistency between my arguing that a scientific transpersonal psychology should (a) aim to bracket and minimize its metaphysical assumptions, and (b) accept the reality of multiple metaphysical cocreations.

I propose *metaphysical bracketing* as a *methodological approach* that seeks to reduce possible contamination of investigations by researchers’ prior beliefs. I accept Taylor’s point that this is never fully achievable, but that does not mean that we should not (a) acknowledge our own potential biases, and (b) put them aside as far as possible. In other words, we should strive to follow the ‘rule of epoché’ as promoted within phenomenological inquiry (see, for example, Laughlin & Rock’s, 2021, interesting discussion of transpersonal phenomenology in the recent issue of *Transpersonal Psychology Review*).

I propose *metaphysical minimalism* as a *hermeneutic strategy* that prefers ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’ interpretation. In practice, this means that if phenomena can be sufficiently explained using naturalistic or psychological concepts, we should generally *prefer* such explanation rather than jumping to metaphysical conclusions. This is essentially my version of Occam’s razor.

I propose *metaphysical openness* as a *perspective* that accepts ‘the possible existence of metaphysical realms, entities and forces that can influence, and interact with, physical and psychological realms’ (Daniels, 2021, p. 229). In practice this means a willingness to entertain metaphysical concepts and interpretations, especially where naturalistic or psychological explanation is inadequate. It also implies a rejection of materialism, respect for different religions, and an acceptance of pluralistic metaphysics.

In my opinion, there is no contradiction or inconsistency between these proposals.

Conclusion

Contrary to the implication in Taylor's critique, I do not reject metaphysics. My call for metaphysical bracketing and minimalism is essentially a methodological and strategic recommendation for a discipline that wishes to be considered scientific. I argue in *Shadow, Self, Spirit* that transpersonal psychology is a 'moral hermeneutic science of spirituality' (Daniels, 2021, p. 278) that promotes spiritual transformation by developing understandings based on systematic investigation. Where metaphysical concepts provide better understandings than purely physiological, psychological, sociological, or humanistic-existential explanations, then we should embrace them.

Ferrer's participatory approach (which I support) is, I suggest, *more* embracing of metaphysical ideas than Taylor's soft perennialism. While Taylor accepts only one universal metaphysical reality – the all-pervading spiritual essence or force – Ferrer acknowledges not only a superordinate reality (the meta-metaphysical 'mystery') but also the possibility of an indefinite number of concrete (cocreated) metaphysical realities. This seems to me a more productive and respectful position from which to investigate and understand the varieties of spiritual experience and religious traditions.

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