BOOK REVIEW


This book represents the culmination of Stanislav Grof’s work over a forty-year span, and in it he summarizes both his philosophical and spiritual insights formed throughout this period exploring human consciousness. Grof, a psychiatrist by training, is one of the few transpersonal theorists who actually grounds his theory-making in data collected in the therapeutic research setting. Many other transpersonal researchers rely on the interpretations of other theorists to construct their theories, as opposed to actual qualitative or quantitative research designs. Grof, then, is the “real deal,” so to speak, and someone who has something authentic to offer. The book comprises eleven chapters that are preceded by an acknowledgment section, and followed by a complete bibliographic reference section.

Chapter 1 (Introduction) provides a clear summary of what the book entails. We learn that, in the 1950s, Grof became interested in psychospiritual pursuits through experiments with lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) as part of his psychiatric training at the School of Medicine in Prague, Czechoslovakia. He conducted extensive research with LSD ingestion and non-ordinary states of consciousness. After LSD use was prohibited, he developed, with his wife Christina, a non-drug method of eliciting non-ordinary conscious states – holotropic breathing. While he has explored many aspects of non-ordinary states of consciousness, he has not been interested in their occurrences in pathological processes, such as cerebral trauma, intoxications due to poisons, infections, or degenerative processes. Instead, he has focused on states of consciousness where the intrapsychic experience is oriented toward “wholeness.”

Grof draws both the perennial philosophy and his consciousness research into this introduction. He also discusses non-ordinary states of consciousness in terms of phenomenological experiences described by individuals during holotropic breathing sessions and correlates these to his previous work with psychedelics. Grof is no “light-weight” in the psychedelic research area, citing that he personally conducted over four thousand psychedelic sessions with participants using substances such as LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, dipropyl-tryptamine (DPT), and methylene-dioxyamphetamine (MDA), and has direct access to reports from over two thousand other sessions conducted by colleagues.

Chapter 2 (Cosmos, Consciousness and Spirit) presents a challenge to modern biochemical consciousness research, arguing persuasively that there is more to human consciousness than biochemical reactions. He also discusses a set of invariant stages, “perinatal stages” uncovered in research sessions, apparently arising from birth trauma. These perinatal experiences revolve around four major themes: birth, death, sex, and violence. He does not limit this chapter on perinatal experiences to these four themes, however, and discusses how transpersonal experiences that
“transcend” the limitations of the body and the egoic self also come into play. These non-ordinary experiences, in Grof’s view, can vastly expand one’s sense of identity, for example, identifying with other people, plants, animals, and various components of nature, such as stones, deities, demons, and even the entire Cosmos. He interprets these phenomena, like Jung, relative to archetypal processes contained in the “collective unconscious.” He does not view the collective unconscious as the absolute ground of being, as Jung did, but as a bridge to that ground.

In Chapter 3 (The Cosmic Creative Principle), Grof states that, when one directly experiences spiritual dimensions of reality, it becomes implausible and absurd for them to think there is no creative cosmic principle behind existence. Grof explains that the cosmic principle is generally deeply experienced in one of two ways: one can merge with the divine source, losing one’s individuality, or one can maintain a sense of individuality, while connecting to the divine source. Grof also maintains that there is a deeper experience of the cosmic principle, that of the paradoxical Void – an emptiness, yet a fullness. Grof professes that complete descriptions of spiritual experiences are not possible, and the best ways to describe them are found through poetry, such as the works of Rumi, Kabir, Sri Aurobindo, Blake, Whitman, and D. H. Lawrence.

Chapter 4 (The Process of Creation) presents the novel concept that perhaps both the phenomenal and material worlds are virtual realities of the cosmic principle. Various non-ordinary states of consciousness, Grof states, seem to suggest just that. One can gain insight into the creative source’s motivation to create the cosmos, and it seems to desire knowing itself at all levels and dimensions, doing so by creating a multi-level, multi-dimensional universe.

In Chapter 5 (The Ways to Reunion with the Cosmic Source), Grof discusses various ways humans have attempted to unite with the cosmic source. He discusses involution, returning to the source, as well as evolution, emerging from the source, level by level, until material manifestation occurs. He also thoroughly discusses varieties of unitive experiences acquired through meditation, extreme psychological events, intense sexual experiences, birthing experiences, out-of-body experiences, and encounters with death.

In Chapter 6 (The Problem of Good and Evil), Grof discusses good and evil from several perspectives. For example, from a relative perspective, after World War II, most humans believed the pesticide DDT to be a blessing, for it effectively eradicated insects, including those causing yellow fever and malaria. Yet, within time, it was discovered that DDT was biocumulative, transferred from exposed insects and the environment, up the food chain until it eventually reached humans, where it was linked to various cancers. This is the “evil” part.

Grof suggests that good and evil are integral parts of creation. Life lives on life, and there is no getting around that. We consume other life forms so we may survive. Grof also argues that the concept of evil may be necessary to motivate humans to evolve. For example, if disease was not present, there would be no need for scientists to transcend their own needs to try to help humanity by curing disease.
In Chapter 7 (Birth, Sex, and Death: The Cosmic Connection), Grof, using birthing as an example, states that many women experience the birthing process as the most intense sexual experiences of their lives. The experience can be so overpowering that it is interpreted as death. Reliving biological birth through holotropic breathing, one may experience dying on a planetary scale. For example, one may die as an aquatic organism, only to be rebirthed as a terrestrial organism. Grof introduces a topic he has discussed in many of his books, the Four Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPMs), which represent the birthing stages. The first BPM is related to the intrauterine experience of the fetus immediately preceding birth. The second BPM represents the first stage of biological birth, when the uterus is contracting on the prepartum fetus, but the cervix has not yet opened. The third BPM represents the second stage of birth, the propulsion of the child through the birth canal as the cervix opens. The fourth BPM, the third stage in the birth process, is the actual emergence of the neonate into the world. Grof presents, in clear and concise examples, the neonate’s feelings and the mythic representations of these four stages.

In Chapter 8 (The Mystery of Karma and Reincarnation), Grof presents a discussion of various reincarnation views from a number of different cultures. Karma (cause and effect) is said to come into play before birth and determines the kinds of lives people will have, based on their karmic inheritance. Grof brings a plethora of clinical data into this chapter in an attempt to verify the authenticity of past life recollections. He concludes the chapter with an anecdote from his research in holotropic experiences and their effect on a person’s core belief systems.

Chapter 9 (The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are) echoes an Alan Watts theme. Grof’s method of holotropic breathing apparently enables individuals to transcend normal egoic boundaries and identify with their deeper spiritual essences. In Grof’s view, humans are not just biological machines who repulsively burp, pass gas, vomit, defecate, urinate, and finally rot. Yet these aspects are part and parcel of human divinity, spiritual beings at their core, who are not separate and alienated monads. This is a very heart-felt chapter.

Chapter 10 (Playing the Cosmic Game) begins with Grof listing three poisons described in Tibetan Buddhism: lust, aggression, and ignorance. Grof argues that the achievement of material status, goods, and power does not, in itself, bring feelings of fulfillment, happiness, or inner peace. Nevertheless, success in the illusive pursuit of this achievement is the goal for most humans. There are millions, even billions, of individuals trying to attain “more” at the expense of other individuals. The end result is that some acquire incredible material wealth and power, while others lose out and become down-trodden.

Grof argues that, through holotropic states, individuals report that the quality and direction of their lives depend on “spiritual intelligence” – that is, the capacity to conduct life in a way that reflects this deep spiritual understanding. In support of this, Grof describes the wheel of life as depicted in Tibetan Buddhist screen paintings. Through holotropic states, he argues, humans can reconnect with important but forgotten experiences in their lives. This can help them integrate practical knowledge with transcendental wisdom.
In the final chapter (Chapter 11, The Sacred and the Profane), Grof contrasts and blends the modern (probably better described as post-modern) society with spirituality and religion. He conceptualizes spirituality as grounded in an individual’s direct experience and religion as a body of collective beliefs.

Grof also discusses the relationship of modern physics to the mystical traditions – metaphorically – and claims they both describe an intelligent, creative principle behind the visible and invisible universe. Grof also describes convincingly the conflict between religion and science as a result of fundamentalisms colliding – fundamental religion and fundamental science – neither side appreciating mystical experiences. Is not that the truth?

*The Cosmic Game* is an important contribution to transpersonal studies by virtue of its masterful weaving of depth psychology, psychiatry, spiritual traditions, mythology, and science. Grof, one of the founders of transpersonal psychology, has presented a clear, concise, and even colorful description of his work relative to the greater transpersonal movement.

His prescription for the problems of the world, like that of so many psychologists, is centered in psychology and intrapsychic experiences. While theoretically valuable, it is too parochial for wide application. The works of Jorge Ferrer in co-participatory spirituality in one’s lived life, in one’s groups, at one’s work, and in one’s interior conception of a life lived transpersonally may offer more effective ways to elicit more extensive change. Roger Walsh’s book, *Staying Alive*, also contains many concrete suggestions to promoting positive changes in the world. Nevertheless, Grof’s book is an extremely important book for those interested in transpersonal studies, humanistic psychology, consciousness research, depth psychology, and social psychology.

**The Author**

Stanislav Grof, M.D., Ph.D., founded the Grof Transpersonal Training Program and taught at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Formerly, he was Chief of Psychiatric Research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and Scholar-in-Residence at the Esalen Institute. He has published over 140 articles and 17 books.

**The Reviewer**

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Editor’s Note. The Cosmic Game was not reviewed when it was published in 1998, and is included now as a major integration of Grof’s theoretical and clinical work.

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