EMPIRICAL RATIONALISM AND TRANSPERSONAL EMPIRICISM: BRIDGING THE TWO EPISTEMIC CULTURES OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: The purposes of this article are to provide a meaningful and critical discourse on the state of the field, identify key obstacles to an intersubjectively shared transpersonal vision, discuss whether transpersonal phenomena disclose the existence of actual transcendent realities, and propose an integrative framework on which the field of transpersonal psychology might proceed that bridges psychological science and transpersonal spirit. Two epistemic cultures of transpersonal psychology can be distinguished—empirical rationalism and transpersonal empiricism—that appear to work in counteraction to one another, yet merge for common purposes in a single academic field in which each plays a part. If the field is to endure in the 21st century as a bona fide academic discipline in its own right, then the two cultures need to blend in a certain fashion for best results.

KEYWORDS: transpersonal psychology, science, empiricism, rationalism, transcendence.

The Two Epistemic Cultures of Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology explores some of the most diverse kinds of psychological phenomena currently studied. It investigates altered states of consciousness, apparition and encounter experiences, channeling, creativity, dreaming, exceptional human experiences, extrasensory perception, hypnosis, meditation, mind-body healing, near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, past-life memories, peak experiences, psychedelic-induced experiences, psychodynamic processes, psychospiritual integrative practices, sexual experiences, shamanism, spiritual emergencies, spontaneous healing, survival of consciousness, and transformative learning (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013). Transpersonal psychology represents the great variety of ideas and extremes of thought of our time, from most conventional to most unusual.

Under its overall auspices are some of the most conventional establishment-oriented concepts and methodologies devoted to continuing traditional ideas in psychology (e.g., Friedman, 1983; Laughlin, McManus, & d’Aquili, 1990; MacDonald & Friedman, 2002; Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986). It also includes a body of theories, research, and practices devoted to quite anti-establishment ideas and concepts—a range of psychic, scientific, and religious eccentricities and anomalies—and other matters that contradict mainstream scientific psychology and challenge it at every point (e.g., Anderson & Braud, 2011; Garcia-Romeu & Tart, 2013; Grof, 1985; Kelly et al., 2007; Krippner & Friedman, 2010; Lancaster, 2004; Murphy, 1992; Palmer & Hastings, 2013; Stevenson, 1997; Tart, 2009; Van Lommel, 2010). The field...
tries to fly ahead with avant-garde ideas of psychotherapy and personal and social transformation, while simultaneously protecting its flank with scientific theory and research.

The metaphor of “Two Cultures” has been applied in other contexts (e.g., the differences between experimental vs. correlational research, Cronbach, 1975; sciences vs. humanities, Snow, 1959/1964) and provides an evocative way of framing the current state of affairs within the field of transpersonal psychology. For purposes of this article, culture is defined as “a set of attitudes, behaviors, and symbols shared by a large group of people and usually communicated from one generation to the next” (Shiraev & Levy, 2013, p. 3). The distinction between the two cultures of transpersonal psychology can perhaps be best framed as a difference of monophasic and polyphasic cultures relative to ways of knowing and what counts as knowledge in a science of transpersonal psychology (cf. Cettina, 1999; Laughlin, 2013).

Broadly conceived, one epistemic culture is constituted by a scientifically conditioned empirical rationalism that emphasizes the sensory, the literal, the cognitive, the rational, the objective, and the social in its epistemology and ontology. The other culture is a psychically oriented transpersonal empiricism that emphasizes the imaginative, the symbolic, the affective, the intuitive, the subjective, and the personal. Transpersonal psychology as a subdiscipline of general psychology bridges these two paradigms.

By combining powers of the physical senses, intellect, and social discourse with powers of the imagination, intuitions, and private subjectivity, transpersonal psychology does more than it knows it does in uniting two ends of the species’ divided psyche and in cultivating what Merton (1974/1989) called “the hidden wholeness in all things” (p. 506). With its books, professional organizations, conferences, undergraduate courses, and graduate degree programs, transpersonal psychology informs and instructs people in two different perspectives on experience and reality, and in this way serves an important educational function for the species’ psychical and spiritual evolution (Rowe & Braud, 2013).

Transpersonal psychology is always to some extent in a state of creative dialectical tension as its counterparts play out “opposite” aspects of each other, yet merge for common purposes in a single academic field. The two frameworks challenge each other in different ways with tendencies that appear to be at odds, but that, as I argue in this paper, are instead different ways of approaching the same goal (Dupré, 1993). Because of those divisions there is a great leeway possible for examining a diverse range of phenomena, concepts, and ideas in theory, research, therapy, and education that otherwise could not mingle in psychology. The two cultures, each with different features and characteristics, reflect different frames of reference, points of view, and habits of mind within transpersonal psychology and mirror the conscious and unconscious intent of individuals who identify themselves as transpersonal psychologists.

The two epistemic cultures do not operate as monolithic structures completely separate from one another, however. The apparent boundaries are functional
boundaries—distinguished only for convenience’s sake in order to bring differences between the two paradigms into sharp relief. The two cultures often appear separately, so that one transpersonal psychologist will be highly conventional and dislike the field’s nonscientific tendencies, while another might be highly responsive to emotionally exciting and avant-garde work. The two cultures can also appear combined within the same individual who will express great enthusiasm over work that is highly creative and intuitional and for ideas that challenge the hidden assumptions behind behavioral research at every point and also have great respect for established theory, research, and practice in traditional psychology. The substantial “intra-cultural” diversity within the field of transpersonal psychology is not to be overlooked. Although the two epistemic cultures for purposes of discussion are conceptually distinguished in a strong way in this article, they are both part of other actions whose integrated function is designed to mediate a more adequate (adequatio) understanding of transpersonal phenomena overall.

Mainstream psychology knows how to deal with so-called supernatural phenomena and metaphysical beliefs (Coon, 1992). It knows how to deal with what it considers pseudo-science (Hornstein, 1992) and with conventional ideas and practices. In a fashion, transpersonal psychology combines all of those elements and transcends them (Combs, 2013). Transpersonal psychology is too anti-establishment to be in introductory psychology college textbooks, but far too empirical and rational to be considered an eccentric pseudo-science. Many orthodox psychologists recognize that reputable scientists and psychotherapists work in the transpersonal field, contributing to collective understanding of the human condition; especially what Maslow (1969a) called “the farther reaches of human nature” (p. 1).

However, orthodox psychology does not know whether or not transpersonal phenomena are fact or fiction, human potential or human illusion, because it does not have a worldview or a concept of self to begin to explain such realities. Transpersonal psychology may propose fascinating theories that contain creatively valid hypothetical constructs, but mainstream psychology remains uncertain whether such ideas or constructs refer to any kind of scientifically valid hardbed reality. This situation poses problems for transpersonal psychologists who view themselves as guardians of the orthodox scientific worldview within the field and who renounce any kind of radical subjectivity that might threaten or undermine its tenuous scientific reputation (e.g., Daniels, 2001, 2005; Friedman, 2002, 2013; Hartelius, Friedman, & Pappas, 2013; MacDonald, 2013).

Transpersonal psychology is attempting to insert new ideas into the world as it now is and recognizes that the two epistemic cultures of psychological science and transpersonal spirit need to be bridged for best results. If the field is to endure in the 21st century as a bona fide academic discipline in its own right and not become further marginalized within general psychology, absorbed as a fringe specialization of religious studies, or continue to be dismissed by positive psychology as unscientific, then its relation to empirical science must
continue to remain a topic of conversation among transpersonal psychologists. As Wilber (1993) so succinctly noted:

The single greatest issue today facing transpersonal psychology is its relation to empirical science. For, the argument goes, if transpersonal psychology is not an empirical science, then it has no valid epistemology, no valid means of acquiring knowledge. There is no use trying to figure out the range or scope or methods of knowledge of the new and “higher” field of transpersonal psychology until you can demonstrate that you have actual knowledge of any sort to begin with. (p. 184)

What Wilber said 22 years ago is as true now as it was then and is one reason why the two cultures of transpersonal psychology have evolved the way they have. Whether or not transpersonal psychology—or the entire field of behavioral sciences, for that matter (Slife & Williams, 1995)—can legitimately be called a “science” in the same way that physics and biology are sciences continues to be a controversial issue to this day (Friedman, 2013; Ferrer, 2014).

This article is a contribution to that ongoing conversation. It examines ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments of transpersonal psychology’s two epistemic cultures—empirical rationalism and transpersonal empiricism. First, I provide a critical analysis of empirical rationalism’s culture on several grounds: (a) the ideal of empirical accessibility and the problem of perception, (b) the problem of scientifically conditioned reasoning, (c) the scientific method as an epistemological strategy, and (d) neo-Kantian ontological neutrality as an epistemological doctrine. Second, I outline the characteristic features of the culture of transpersonal empiricism in relationship to the culture of empirical rationalism and how they differ. Third, I examine the question of whether or not transpersonal empiricism reveals the existence of actual transcendent realities. Fourth, I propose an ontology of mind that has the potential of moving transpersonal psychology several steps further “beyond ego” and away from a position of neo-Kantian ontological neutrality in order to expand the nature of its own epistemological and ontological commitments so that it can be aware of a more profound version of reality than it may presently perceive.

Part 1

The Epistemic Culture of Empirical Rationalism

The culture of empirical rationalism firmly situates transpersonal theory, research, and practice in a knowledge framework grounded in the empiricism of the physical senses combined with a scientifically conditioned rationalism characteristic of the physical and natural sciences. As Ferrer (2014) pointed out, empirical rationalism carries its own set of ontological commitments (i.e., the real is material, sensory, publically observable, consensually validated) and epistemological assumptions (i.e., only physical existence is valid and can be known; other realities not accessible to the physical senses or consensually
validated cannot be known). It carries its own methods and “solutions” to problems, its own means of achieving ends and satisfying its curiosity (i.e., the scientific method; Myers & Hansen, 2012). These commitments, assumptions, and methods suit certain kinds of people better than others, even while empirical rationalism still carries its disadvantages.

The Ideal of Empirical Accessibility and the Problem of Perception

In empirical rationalism, the reasoning mind (or what used to be called the “intellect”) has been conditioned to operate in concert with the physical senses. Inasmuch as transpersonal psychologists must sensorily perceive what they are looking for, their knowledge is dependent upon physical senses. Sense data are important. Nevertheless, there must be a balance. A psychology that confines itself to only what it can reasonably prove on the basis of experience via the physical senses cannot perceive or even allow itself to acknowledge the existence of a rich nonphysical, nonsensory dimension of inside psychological depth and complexity to either nature or the self. Subjective experience will not be considered as valid unless it is accessible to experience via the senses, despite the fact that a psychological experience that may have no observable physical effect can change a personality to a large degree.

One of the main difficulties with empirical rationalism is that it will not accept as evidence anything that is not perceivable in one manner or another through the physical senses. Sensations do not exhaust psychological life, however. Nor is perception an infallible guide to knowledge. A frog, a star, a tree, a flower, a human brain and body must be considered solid, as it is in the world of physical sensation and perception. In other quite as factual physical terms in the larger framework of facts of modern physics, however, none of these is solid at all, as no objects are. Perception of them makes them appear to be relatively stable and solid, and biologically the species is tuned in to that perception.

Empiricism of the physical senses and their extension through the use of material instruments cannot provide the necessary foundation of an adequate theory of knowledge for transpersonal psychology for eight important reasons:

1. Sensory experience is a function of the perceptual apparatus.
2. Every act of sensation involves a change in the stimulus.
3. Every act of sensation involves a change in the perceiver.
4. The temporal properties of sensation limit perception.
5. Perception is an active process that always involves some contribution from the perceiver.
6. Sensory perception is only one of many possible ways of perceiving basic reality.
7. Consensual validation is culturally relative.
8. Scientific instruments are subject to the same limitations and produce similar distortions as the physical senses they are designed to extend.
Sensory psychology clearly demonstrates that the observer does not have clear, direct, immediate access to an already-out-there-now “real” world via the physical senses and that the information that is accessible to experience is often incomplete, distorted, prejudiced, and misleading (Wolfe et al., 2015).

**Sensory experience is a function of the perceptual apparatus.** First, the nature of the perceptual apparatus operative at any given time determines the information accessible to experience via the senses, not the physical stimulus. Johannes Muller (1843) in his doctrine of specific nerve energies recognized long ago that perception of physical reality is limited to the types of sense receptors that an organism possesses. The physical senses are quite limited in certain terms, acting as inhibitors of perception that encode only stimuli that fall within a specific range of frequencies that the organism’s perceptual apparatus is physiologically designed to detect.

Physically, the human observer can handle only so much data at once and is dependent in that respect upon the neurological structure. What falls outside its range is psychologically invisible, limiting what the individual might otherwise perceive with a different perceptual apparatus. Other species have specialized sensory modalities that permit them to focus on fields of energy not detected by human physical senses at all (Jenkins, 2014). Many quite real physical phenomena cannot be perceived by human physical senses. There is always more to physical reality than human physical senses can show.

Because the physical senses have evolved only to sense physical data, they do not perceive nonphysical data. The focus of attention upon sensory data forms boundaries in perception that predispose human observers to imagine that what they cannot or do not perceive must be nonexistent. Modern physical theory has demonstrated, however, that what appears to be “empty” space where nothing is perceived is not really empty, but instead filled with a swirling commotion of atoms and molecules, electromagnetic waves, thermal energies, and so forth (Stapp, 2004). The sensory receptors simply do not allow observers to tune into these other ranges of activity. Any action perceived using physical senses, therefore, may be only a portion of the true dimensionality of that event and represent but a mere fraction of what reality is. Just because physical data are accessible to experience via the senses does not mean that physical reality is the only reality. It is simply the only reality perceived using physical senses.

**Every act of sensation involves a change in the stimulus.** Second, when sensory receptors or their extensions detect available stimulus energies, these are automatically altered and modified through transduction into the sort of data that the nervous system can handle (e.g., electrochemical energy) or that the technological machine was built to encode. Each sense is a living transducer that transforms otherwise unknowable stimulus energies (e.g., electromagnetic energy, vibrating air waves, frequencies of mechanical stimulation, gas and liquid atoms and molecules) into other knowable sensory terms (color, sound, temperature, pressure, taste, odors). The physical senses force the observer to translate experience into sensory terms that physical reality does not inherently possess but that the observer perceives it to have (e.g., qualia of solidity,
duration, color, loudness, sweetness, cold). Sense data do have a reality; however, this reality does not solely reside in the stimulus.

It was Herman von Helmholtz (b.1821– d.1894) who recognized the sensory fact that the physical senses actualize aspects of reality that otherwise exist only as potential experiences. Sensation and creation are far more intimately connected than is recognized, and, in a very real manner, physical senses manufacture the reality that they perceive:

Our perceptual experience is not only shaped by the nervous system, as in the example of rod and cone vision, but—in cases such as color vision, hearing, taste, and smell—the very essence of our experience is created by the nervous system. (Goldstein, 2014, p. 222)

Gestalt psychologists demonstrated that what is accessible to conscious experience via the senses differs from what is physically present and that perceptions are structured in ways that sensory stimulation is not (Koffka, 1935). Binocular disparity of the human physical senses necessitate the perception of three-dimensional space, for instance. Using the physical senses, human beings can perceive physical reality in no other way.

**Every act of sensation involves a change in the perceiver.** Third, not only are available stimulus energies translated by the medium or machine through which they are detected and encoded, but also the perceptual apparatus itself (i.e., the sensory receptors, bodily electromagnetic system, and neurological structure of the perceiver) is altered by the action of transduction. Any sensation instantly changes the perceiver as sensory information automatically intermingles and becomes enmeshed with the perceiver’s entire nervous system. The perceiver (noesis) and thing perceived (noema) are part of the same action, each changing the other. Any interpretation of an event alters it.

The changes occur so automatically and seamlessly that the instant transformations are not noticed at a conscious level. The changes bring both the perceiver and the thing perceived into correspondence with one another, and the perceiver takes the physical appearance that is perceived for reality itself (e.g., naïve realism of common sense; Robinson, 1994). It is taken for granted that information accessible to experience via the senses is an actual and direct representation of what is sensed. Nothing, however, about the physical nature of any sensation is neutral or “objective” in these terms.

**The temporal properties of sensation limit perception.** A fourth reason why the empiricism of the physical senses cannot provide the necessary foundation for an adequate theory of knowledge for transpersonal psychology is related to physical perception’s temporal properties. Time, as we experience it, is arguably an illusion caused by the perceiver’s neurological structure, forcing the person to perceive action a little bit “at a time;” thereby presenting a camouflaged, highly limited and limiting version of basic reality (Slife, 1993). We must perceive what we do of physical actions through our physical senses, and physical senses cannot perceive events until they have already occurred.
The reasoning mind is, therefore, forced to rely upon a limited amount of physical evidence available at any given time in the present in order to make deductions about information it wants that is not physically present. It must try to deduce the nature of the whole that it cannot perceive from the portions available to experience that it can perceive in the present via the senses. The validity of these deductions depends on the accuracy and completeness of the sensory information that, while present, is not inevitably all the evidence available. Other facts and comprehensions that are available may not be consciously perceived or accepted for one reason or another. There is always more going on than sense data show and the reasoning mind knows.

**Perception is an active process that always involves some contribution from the perceiver.** Fifth, sensory-based knowledge depends as much on who the observer is as it depends on what stimulus is perceived. Helmholtz (like Kant before him) recognized that the perceiver transforms what the senses provide by making an active contribution to the perception in the form of idea constructions—personal chains of conditioned associations, fantasies, emotions, and memories that embellish sensory information and convert pre-categorical sensation into meaningful perception. Cognitive psychology explains how these idea constructions are created (Matlin, 2013, pp. 272-290). Information accessible to experience via the senses is selectively detected and encoded in accordance with the observer’s beliefs and expectations, meaning is abstracted and what is thought to be unimportant is ignored or overlooked. Inferences are made to fill in gaps of missing information based on past experience, and the idea construction that remains becomes integrated with previously acquired information.

Physical senses are highly discriminating and induce a conscious focusing of attention along certain limited lines, forcing the observer to ignore discontinuities in sensory information and concentrate instead upon similarities and continuities in experience, making a pattern of them using Gestalt principles of organization as perceptual heuristics. Patterns perceived as belonging to the stimulus are actually ones that the observer has transposed upon the sensory data and are constructed in a manner consistent with the senses that the perceiver happens to have operative at the time. It is impossible not to structure stimuli to some extent in sensory terms if it is to be perceived by physical senses (Gregory, 1970).

**Sensory perception is only one of many possible ways of perceiving basic reality.** Sixth, as Kant noted, human beings are born by design and already conditioned to perceive reality in a particular manner. Those perceptions would have no meaning were it not for the species’ own unique kind of consciousness. Each species perceives a flower’s reality through its own set of specialized senses and as such it is valid. The human species cannot perceive the valid reality of that flower in any context but its own -- nor in a form any more basic than other species.

The flower exists, but it takes a shape and form that the human species recognizes only in its own perception. The flower itself and its perceived reality
may exist in far different terms. This does not mean that sensory perception of
the physical world is false or that sensory perception is not a legitimate and
valid way of obtaining knowledge about human experience and behavior. It
does mean that the sensory picture is only one of many possible ways of
perceiving the guises through which basic reality discloses itself, appearing in
terms that the perceiving organism can understand (Ackerman, 1990).

Physical reality is lively, messy, and complicated, and the observer must close
herself or himself off from some stimuli in order to more fully utilize perceived
stimuli. The observer’s own concepts, expectations, and memories serve as
organizational schemata that screen out certain information or stimuli that
would automatically catch another individual’s attention. The observer views
the physical world from his or her own perceptive focus—a highly limited one
in certain terms—and sees one version of an event or object as it seems to exist
at the moment of perception. The same stimulus can also give rise to different
perceptions depending on the context in which it is observed. For any
perception, other perceptions are always possible.

Consensual validation is culturally relative. Seventh, the reasoning mind
wants to see the world as it is seen by the minds of others because it is, by
nature, socially oriented. It therefore looks for agreement among individuals’
idea constructions in terms of their logical consistency by organizing sensory
perceptions and deductions along the lines of certain ideas and by finding data
that serve to give those ideas validity. The reasoning mind is, in a sense,
a cultural phenomenon that can orient itself along the lines of the idea
constructions or general knowledge of any given historical period or culture,
using its reasoning abilities to bring such a world picture into focus, collecting
data that agree and rejecting what does not, using sensory data to justify and
validate its own conclusions (e.g., the world is flat vs. the world is round). By
translating perceptual information into its proper “cultural” context, the
reasoning mind helps create both the cultural environment and the consensual
validation that it seeks (Ross, 2003).

Like statistics, the reasoning mind can be used to come to almost any
conclusion, and, because it must have a reason for everything, it collects
evidence to prove its point. Starting from the same basic premises or body of
evidence, highly rational minds can use logic to arrive at diametrically opposed
conclusion by taking into consideration within any given system of reasoning
only evidence that agrees with the system’s premises (Slife, 2013). Foundational
premises include the system’s epistemological assumptions (e.g., what is
knowable vs. unknowable, true vs. false, reasonable vs. unreasonable) and
ontological assumptions (e.g., what is real vs. unreal, possible vs. impossible,
natural vs. supernatural). These epistemic and ontic assumptions guide the
early bottom-up processing of sensory stimuli and influence top-down
perceptual experience, especially when the stimulus array is incomplete,
ambiguous, complicated, or indistinct (Matlin, 2013).

Physical senses thus force human observers to perceive an available field of
energy in physical terms, imposing a highly specialized and patterned idea
construction upon the stimulus array. This is the result of almost simultaneous “bottom-up” sensory analysis of the stimulus and “top-down” influence of concepts, expectations, and memory upon perceptual processes (Goldstein, 2014). Although individuals may agree along certain lines that they see the same object by virtue of similar neurological mechanisms, social conditioning, collective public knowledge, and other factors (e.g., telepathic communication), they do not perceive the same object, only their own idea constructions and not those of others. Nothing about the psychological nature of any perception is neutral or “objective” in these terms.

Scientific instruments are subject to the same limitations and produce similar distortions as the physical senses they are designed to extend. Eight, epistemological and ontological assumptions are also built into the design of instruments specifically constructed to be able to sense (and measure) energies and aspects of reality that the human physical apparatus is not evolutionarily prepared to perceive directly (Uttal, 2001, pp. 29-87). Scientific instruments constructed to visualize the living human brain (i.e., CT, MRI, PET, fMRI), for example, are all designed to capture certain stimulus energies and translate what they apparently “see” into specific kinds of sensory patterns with which the scientist’s physical senses are familiar. The instruments themselves do this transformation—transforming the idea of religious experience, for instance, into radio-frequency waves, radioactivity, electricity, or electromagnetism—translating data the perceiver cannot understand into sensory terms that can be understood.

Translation often involves extensive and elaborate pre-processing of imaging data—“data cleaning” methods involving complex statistical filtering, transformations, standardization, corrections, and manipulation of raw data. This results in the creation of highly standardized and simplified “model” brain images totally unlike the brain image of any individual subject to the detriment of understanding the true variety of religious experience and the nature of underlying brain activations. The instruments do not deal with direct perception of neural or cognitive processes but with the transduction and encoding of those processes into sensory patterns and thus have built-in distortive effects. What results is so simplified, watered down, and distorted out of shape that the original data become hardly discernible, and any glimmer of understanding that might have been reached about the neural and cognitive correlates of spiritual practice is lost sight of (Cunningham, 2011a; Dumit, 2012). Being part and parcel of the physical reality they are designed to detect, the instruments reduce reality to their terms, just like the physical senses they are designed to extend.

Physical instruments are useless in themselves as far as enabling perception of subjective experience or other dimensions of reality outside physical systems of reference because this is not their function. The one instrument that is more important than any other for discovering the existence of spiritual referents and subtle, energetic dimensions of reality is the mind. The mind is the connection between the physical and the nonphysical, the meeting place of inner and outer senses, the tool of discovery of inner and outer realities. To
become aware of the existence of transcendent realities, it is within the psyche that one must probe and it is with inner tools that one must work with—the imagination, the intuitions, and the reasoning mind.

The Problem of Scientifically Conditioned Rationality

In the present age, however, the reasoning mind has become so scientifically conditioned that reason is now identified with the scientific method and rational thinking equated with scientific ideas (Halpern, 2013; Stanovich, 2012). Because of definitions individuals have been taught through social and cultural conditioning, it seems there is only one narrow kind of empiricism and rationality—the empiricism of the physical senses and rationality of the scientific method and the ideas generated under its auspices. Part of the difficulty is that scientific theories sometimes come to be regarded as more or less statements of literal fact by virtue of the identification of reason with the scientific method (Schick & Vaughn, 2013; Vyse, 2013). Scientific propositions that life began by accident (Big Bang Theory), that daily events are governed by chance (Normal Distribution Curve), and that the purpose of human existence is reproductive success of the species (neo-Darwinism) appear the most reasonable and logical of “facts” of daily life because of their purported scientific status.

The reasoning animal. A prototypical example is the scientific blend of rationalism that defines the individual as a “reasoning” animal in strictly Darwinian terms, and which most of human society now takes more or less for granted as literally true, but that has serious shortcomings as a theory of human nature (Nagel, 2012; Rose & Rose, 2000). As a consequence of this creative hypothesis, the species has come to view itself as the flowering blossom at the end of a long progressive series of evolving material entities organized into a great “chain of being” culminating with humans as the reasoning animal. Within this Darwinian scheme, the species’ identity is first and foremost connected with the reasoning mind or intellect.

Evolution’s flower is a frail blossom, however, when Darwin’s scheme becomes embedded within the context of other scientific theories that are also taken for granted as literal fact. Add as cosmological context the deadly and prosaic Big Bang Theory of a physical universe fortuitously created 13.7 billion years ago and you have, by implication, a human species that is itself created by chance with no intrinsic purpose other than its own survival and reproduction. Then endow such a species with a compartmentalized ego and an intellect that is in conflict with dangerous emotions and an untrustworthy subjectivity, and we end up with a throw-away species accidentally formed by mindless matter that is divided against itself. Such beliefs are indeed more false than true from the viewpoint of transpersonal empiricism. They are an important cause of the sense of powerlessness that people feel in the face of events that they do not understand and believe they cannot control. The reasoning mind is not to blame for the difficulty that it has been put into, however, and does the best it can under the sway of a material naturalism that it has accepted as a fact about its own experience and reality.

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**Closed naturalism.** The material naturalism of empirical rationalism assigns the world of nature to the realm of exterior events and therefore views it as inherently mechanistic. From the Darwinian point of view, human beings reason, nature does not. It then does indeed seem that the species is somehow apart from nature. When the scientifically conditioned reasoning mind declares that all of the complicated behavior of other species operates by blind instinct or mindless fixed action patterns, then the gulf between the reasoning mind and nature seems to deepen. Non-human animals (i.e., mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, birds, and invertebrates) are denied much subjective dimension and certainly no reasoning capabilities or “objective” knowledge of their own being—as if an individual animal exists without knowing it exists or knowing what it is (Rollin, 1989).

Ethologists and comparative animal psychologists have demonstrated, however, that animals do reason, do understand cause and effect, and display curiosity, even though it may not be applied in the same areas or at the same levels of activity as human reasoning (Bekoff, Allen, & Burghardt, 2002; Griffin, 2001; Wynne & Udell, 2013). It remains difficult for the human species, nevertheless, to consider the possibility that a sense of identity and self-awareness can occur without a human intellect when the species identifies so strongly with a particular (neo-Darwinian) scientific explanation of its own reasoning abilities (Suddendorf, 2013). Perhaps animals do not reflect upon the nature of their own identities in the same way humans do because they have no need to. Perhaps it is intuitively grasped and self-evident to them in a way that human identity is not to the human ego, being a different kind of selfhood and a different way to experience self-awareness.

Identifying its sense of selfhood almost exclusively with cognitive activity, the human species comes to think of the conscious mind with its intellect not as a *part of* its identity but as *containing* its identity. Its reasoning mind becomes localized somewhere between two ears behind the forehead with emotions situated somewhere else in the body, often operating in what seems to be quite contradictory fashions. For the species, identifying primarily with one’s mind and brain, other equally vital elements of personhood such as the imagination and the intuitions come to be more or less cast aside. Forced to operate philosophically isolated from other portions of the personality (in the Cartesian sense) and trying to solve all problems through the use of reason alone (in the Kantian sense), science with its scientific method becomes cut off from other sources of information, feedback, and the support of those very abilities that it needs in order to do its proper work.

**The Scientific Method as an Epistemological Strategy**

Like the physical senses and reasoning mind on which it relies, the scientific method is programmed to induce a conscious focusing upon similarities in experience and minimize variance. Grounding its logic on the rules of language and grouping its concepts into narrow true-and-false categories, the scientific method is designed to force the reasoning mind to be selectively aware of certain category relations that fit into preconceived deductive and inductive
patterns that the researcher has transposed upon the phenomenon (Slife & Williams, 1995). Theories are built and hypotheses are formulated to fit temporally conditioned cause-and-effect schemes, forcing the phenomenon being investigated to display only a certain face to the researcher. This is why non-experimental evidence remains such an extremely important source of information concerning the nature, limits and existence of transpersonal phenomena that can be adequately understood only in its natural setting.

Experiments are designed to place specific constraints upon the phenomenon and thus bring the researcher into correspondence with the results most likely to lead to a theory’s affirmation. Some scientists may come to believe that recreating in a laboratory setting portions of a phenomenon gives him or her mastery and control over it. The more precise and faithful the re-creation, the more complete the mastery. This has quite magical connotations. The evidence produced generally carries the weight of strong validity within its own framework and convincingly works only as long as one stays within the framework and generates the hypotheses that such frameworks automatically entail. Scientists are left with “workable” facts that help them manipulate within their chosen framework but that do not apply when they try to venture outside that context. Insisting that any discovered facts must “fit in” with already known facts and established scientific theories, the reasoning mind builds up a particular kind of picture of reality by collecting all evidence that fits.

Researchers are bound to find the “facts” they are looking for because their perceptions quite naturally lead them to dismiss anomalies and ignore the larger arrangements of data that do not “work” (Barber, 1961; Brewer & Chinn, 1994; Kuhn, 1970; Rubic, 1997). Other quite real, quite valid physical evidence always apparent at any given time is not focused upon and gradually becomes discarded because it does not fit into the so-called rational picture that has been developed. The epistemology of empirical rationalism is thus left with the unenviable situation of being unable to discover truly new facts that would lead to greater knowledge.

**Divide and conquer.** This particular approach for achieving scientific ends (*scientia*, knowledge through causes) prefers to divide up the whole of a phenomenon into bits and pieces, label and categorize those parts into conceptually distinguishable components that are then analyzed and studied in an exterior manner. This “divide-and-conquer” strategy has been applied broadly to all fields of human knowledge, resulting in the creation of separate academic disciplines, each with its own group of facts, none reducible to the other, with no separate discipline or content area that combines or unifies them all to everyone’s satisfaction. The strategy has been used with great success by physical and natural sciences in producing unprecedented technological advances and in solving real-world problems. The analytical nature of this strategy, however, tends to overlook the cooperative and uniting forces of nature and of the psyche that are every bit as real. As a result, empirical rationalism cannot offer or even suggest a hypothesis that would provide any comprehensive idea of what *basic reality* really is and where intent, purpose, or desire figure in.
Within such a knowledge framework, the imagination, creativity, intuition, and individual subjectivity are considered sources of error variance and quite unrespectable as an origin of knowledge in a scientific psychology that seeks to standardize “correct” thought so that it conforms to ideals of empirical accessibility, repeatability, and consensual validation. Subjective visions and private interpretations of what William James (1902/1936) called “the higher part of the universe” (p. 507) may be theoretically fascinating and creatively valid, but like poetry, religion, and works of fiction do not necessarily contain any statement about scientifically valid hardbed reality. Objective knowledge claims can never be justified on the basis of individual subjective experience alone but require consensual validation by appropriately trained observers who can exactly replicate the experience within themselves.

“Normal” science. Corresponding philosophies of science—such as a neo-Kantian epistemology or an empiricist ontology of material naturalism—that are fervently believed in and repeated often enough with the best of intentions by revered mentors during early years of scientific training, soon become uncritically accepted and act like strong hypnotic suggestions that trigger behaviors strongly implied by those beliefs. No longer examined, these scientifically conditioned philosophies about the nature of reality and human knowing are taken for granted as literal truth and appear to be statements of fact, proven “true” by the simple process of excluding anything that seems contradictory. In the end, the ontological commitments and epistemological beliefs of empirical rationalism appear as the only logical kind of knowledge framework that can so well and exactly identify the mechanisms by which inert, lifeless elements mindlessly come together to produce life and behavior in plants and animals alike (Searle, 2000). To strive for any other scientific ideal and still claim itself to be a legitimate scientific subdiscipline of orthodox psychology is to engage in unethical, hypocritical, and possibly illegal behavior (Friedman, 2013).

Normal science and the knowledge frameworks that it generates may thus structure the researcher’s experience and behavior to such an extent that alternative theories, hypotheses, and methods seem foolhardy, untrustworthy, or completely impossible as a source of knowledge. Information generated using this particular way of knowing (i.e., the scientific method) is deemed somehow superior, more important, and nearer to the truth, than information produced by other ways of knowing. Conditioned by such beliefs, science becomes “ego bound”—a tyrant that does not want to admit the existence of any dimensions of basic reality other than those with which it is familiar and comfortable and accepts.

Separating itself from the more intuitive and affective portions of its overall identity, science (like the ego) then becomes isolated, paranoid, and held in a kind of spiritual rigidity that limits its understanding of the nature of outer and inner reality. Trained to be unemotional and to stand solely on the side of reason, scientists learn to separate themselves from the subjects they study and distrust their subjectivity even while they must use it and be vividly aware of it in the passionate pursuit of their research (Birke & Smith, 1995). As feminist
scholars and philosophers of science have indicated, however, this theoretic “ideal” does not accurately reflect science’s intrinsic nature in practice (Bauer, 1994; Clarke, 2009; Fishman, 2007; Padovani, Richardson, & Tsou, 2015). The reasoning mind is far more resilient, curious, creative, and eager to learn than is generally supposed. The scientific method is quite capable of allowing freedom to the inner self’s intuitions so that knowledge of basic reality’s own greater “unknown” dimensions can be made known through personal experience.

Ontological Neutrality as an Epistemological Doctrine

The determination to be “scientific” like the physical and natural sciences, however, brings about a particular brand of transpersonal psychology that is a relatively narrow one, resulting in a certain artificial shrinking of what constitutes transpersonal phenomena to those aspects that can be studied in an exterior fashion. What cannot be defined in operational terms for experimental control and manipulation, measured in psychometric terms for statistical analysis, or imaged by brain scanning devices is presumed not to exist in any real way. The reasoning mind is stripped down to bare essentials, perceiving the spectacular complexity of interior and exterior reality in the simplest of terms (Occam’s razor), and concentrating upon only certain material information (i.e., sensory) derived from a particular way of knowing (i.e., the physical senses in concert with the intellect).

Some transpersonal authors embrace the epistemology of empirical rationalism despite its disadvantages in an effort to maintain what they think of as a balanced viewpoint and open mind. Actually, this brand of science is neither balanced nor open. It accepts only certain areas of inquiry as appropriate for study and areas outside its boundaries become off-limits and taboo subjects. Clear and distinct boundaries are erected between “scientific” transpersonal psychology and its so-called pseudoscientific counterparts (e.g., New Age ideas and related esoteric theosophical and anthroposophical speculations; Hane-graaff, 1998). The very word “transcendent” becomes suspect as the divide-and-conquer strategy is applied to the entire realm of transpersonal phenomena so that it is separated into two halves—a knowable nontranscendent portion accessible to experience via the physical senses and an unknowable transcendent portion, declared not to be even a part of the natural order because it possesses non-material, non-sensory, and non-spatial qualia (Daniels, 2001, 2005; Friedman, 2013).

Because nothing is “given” in sensory experience regarding the material existence of spiritual referents or subtle energetic dimensions of reality, the actuality of such intangible entities is categorically declared to be empirically and logically unknowable (neo-Kantianism). Since nothing can be known about such realities using the physical senses (or their instrumental extensions), then nothing can or should be said—a doctrine called “ontological neutrality” (cf. Friedman, 2002; Nelson, 1990). On this neo-Kantian view, a truly scientific transpersonal psychology requires the conceptual splitting of epistemology from ontology and keeping the two groups of facts separate (if the existence of
ontological facts is even granted at all). As a consequence of this doctrine, the
philosophical movement within transpersonal psychology remains to this day
very limited (Walach, 2013). Cultural beliefs are sufficient to account for
religious experiences and behaviors without the need for ontological

**Scientific realism.** Paradoxically, those who would automatically apply the
doctrine of ontological neutrality to transpersonal phenomena do not apply it
in an even-handed way to phenomena that the natural and physical sciences
study and whose ontological status is taken for granted. The scientific realism
of empirical rationalism confidently (a) presupposes the reality-status of the
“given” physical objects that it studies, (b) assumes that such objects are
directly and immediately accessible to experience via the physical senses (i.e.,
we “see” actual physical objects), and (c) takes for granted that consensually
validated perceptions provide the most accurate representations of an
“already-out-there-now-real” world as it exists independent of the human
observer (Ross, 1970). The truth of these ontological assumptions (i.e., the real
is material, sensory, publically observable, and consensually validated) is
claimed to be demonstrated by their fruits (e.g., technological advances and
practical solutions to real-world problems).

Without the ontological commitments of scientific realism, it has been argued
that science in general and cognitive neuroscience in particular, as we know it,
could not be done (cf. Bunge, 2006; Mahner, 2012; Uttal, 2011). To believe that
the empirical-rationalistic scientific method operates without implied assump-
tions of its own regarding the ontological status of the phenomenon that it
studies is, therefore, a false belief (Ferrer, 2014). Ideas and concepts about
what is real and unreal, what is possible and impossible, provide the context for
all ways of knowing and have important implications for what is deemed
knowable and unknowable.

In a universe defined by the ontological commitments of scientific realism,
telekinesis (Braude, 1997), reincarnation (Ten Dam, 2003), and post-mortem
survival (Braude, 2003) cannot exist because the laws of nature formulated
through direct or indirect interpretations of matter as perceived through the
physical senses make their occurrence appear to be a logical impossibility. Yet
modern physical theory has been increasingly forced to acknowledge a
relational view of reality supported by Einstein’s relativity and Heisenberg’s
quantum mechanics and an ontological holism characterized by entanglement
and emergence that makes such phenomena a theoretical possibility (Radin,
2006; Zajonc, 1993).

The culture of empirical rationalism, despite its outward appearing scientific
face, however, still acts as if such concepts have no application to understanding
the nature of personality action. It prefers to build models of experience and
behavior along the lines of Newtonian mechanics and ignore those very scientific
theories that could give ontological status to an inner, multidimensional
transpersonal Self that operates beyond the margins of normal waking
consciousness in other dimensions of actuality (Kelly et al., 2007).
The nominal existence of a transpersonal self may be given lip service but any investigation into its ontological status beyond the ego’s conception of its own self-expansiveness is steadfastly prohibited. Consequently, transcendence of the ego becomes defined, not in terms of an individual’s self-validating experience of other dimensions of reality, but delimited to a person’s willingness to attribute certain concepts to one’s egoic identity in response to the question, “Who Am I?” (e.g., Self-Expansiveness Scale; Friedman, 1983, 2013). This inevitably results in a certain scaling down of what constitutes transcendence (Maslow, 1969b; 1971, Chap. 21) and turns the notion of transcendence into a construct of the personal ego who now regards itself as the Self (cf. Ferrer, 2014).

The selective application of the doctrine of ontological neutrality to transpersonal phenomena, however, is problematic and highly questionable (Curd & Cover, 1997; Davidson, 1984; Harman, 1994; Rothberg, 2000; Schillbrack, 2014; Tarnas, 1991). Ferrer (2014) recently called attention to the conceptual and methodological difficulties that accompany the epistemological agnosticism and skepticism implied by any transpersonal psychology that brackets the ontological status of spiritual referents. Such an epistemology presupposes the validity of an ontology in which the world and consciousness are judged to be two radically different things with an unbridgeable gap between them whose crossing remains forever doubtful.

To acknowledge that transpersonal experiences exist, without also acknowledging the distinctly real possibility of a corresponding ontological context that grounds them, moreover, is epistemologically suspect and spiritually alienating (Huxley, 1940/1970). When transpersonal psychology declares (a) that it is neutral in regards to the validity and legitimacy of spiritual experiences as states of knowledge, (b) that conventional and transpersonal research methods can never reveal the distinctly real existence of nonphysical entities and other dimensions of actuality, or (c) that certain kinds of knowledge and value-fulfillment are outside its framework of reference, it implies that transpersonal experiences, their epistemic and affective content, and the kinds of value-fulfillment that they generate are without basis, whether it intends to or not, and that we must forever remain ignorant of our spiritual heritage.

I do not want to give the impression that rational empiricism is inappropriate for solving many central problems in the field of transpersonal psychology or that it is not a worthwhile means for achieving meaningful ends important to transpersonal psychologists. Indeed, transpersonal psychology’s scientific reputation in many ways has depended on its ability to implement and integrate rational empiricism’s disciplined and consistent methodology into its research agenda (Anderson & Braud, 2011). No transpersonal scholar embraces empirical rationalism completely to the exclusion of other ways of transpersonal knowing (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013). Most recognize that the world of the psyche exists alongside the world of matter and both worlds intersect such that certain methods of perception work better in one area and others work better in the other.

When this distinction is ignored or denied, however, because only a small aspect of basic reality is granted as valid and “real,” or because no significant
subjective experience is allowed to intrude into empirical rationalism’s calculations, then devastating results can occur as has arguably happened in the field of mainstream psychology today. The physical senses and the reasoning mind turn their sights completely away from any recognition of their deeper source and as a consequence come to dismiss other portions of the personality—such as imagination, dreams, and feelings—as mere uninformed by-products accidentally formed by mindless matter of the physical brain. The argument here is that enlarging its definition of empiricism and accepting new methods of perception into its repertoire will enable empirical rationalism to greatly expand its present form and transcend the limitations that it sometimes feels forced to impose on the field of transpersonal psychology because of its particular epistemological and ontological commitments (Wilber, 1990).

Part 2

The Epistemic Culture of Transpersonal Empiricism

Transpersonal empiricism transcends the limitations that empirical rationalism puts upon transpersonal psychology by expanding the abilities of the reasoning mind and what counts as knowledge. It considers the reasoning mind as a vital, inherent portion of individual identity that is part of a greater field of interrelatedness that includes the emotions, creativity, imagination, and intuitions. The culture of transpersonal empiricism enlarges the scope of abilities of the reasoning mind to include these often shunted-aside psychodynamically active aspects of the human psyche so that their richness, depth, and vitality may be added to characteristics of human cognition and to the defining features of transpersonal psychology (Braud, 2006).

The reasoning mind’s deeper rationality. The reasoning mind can be far more flexible and creative than it is presently allowed to be, operating as it does in research contexts that force it to become something less than it is. The questioning power of the reasoning mind—its critical thinking and analytical aspect—is just one of its functions, but not its primary purpose. The reasoning mind is basically able to handle many kinds of information and several world views at once, operating with separate assumptions that apply to different realities, realizing that each framework are methods of perceiving and approaching a basic reality that is simultaneously immanent and transcendent, physical and nonphysical. When the reasoning mind is offered only one acceptable worldview and only one main approach to transpersonal phenomena, however, then its orderly nature causes it to throw out all information that does not fit, resulting in a jigsaw puzzle picture that contains only half or maybe one third of the pieces. Life’s meaning and purpose become inscrutable under such conditions and answers to the question of life’s tragedies become unsatisfactory, incomplete, and misleading.

When the reasoning mind is enriched by having in its possession several world views and methods of perception that apply to different realities, then it can do an excellent job of sorting information, merging it into meaningful
patterns, and better answering the questions put to it (Sturrock, 2009). It is not that transpersonal empiricism overlooks physical data, but that it regards them differently. It uses sensory, cognitive, rational, social processes and imaginative, emotional, intuitive, personal processes in a more unified fashion (Ferrer, 2003). Using the same reasoning process as empirical rationalism, a more expansive picture of basic reality and of human knowing is built up that in one way or another brings about a different, more creative field of transpersonal psychology guided by different ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments.

**Ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments.** Transpersonal empiricism presupposes that the environment and the individual are uniquely suited to work together, for example, and that every human being is a united creature fulfilling purposes in nature even as animals do—whether or not those purposes are rationally understood (Fox, 1990). It believes that the means for development are within each individual and that the life of any individual will develop and mature and fulfill itself naturally (Assagioli, 1991; Sutich, 1972). Transpersonal empiricism is open to the possibility that each person might live beyond his or her own biological death and have a fulfilling future even though death may be tomorrow (Braude, 2003; Fontana, 2005; Gauld, 1982; Myers, 1903; Spong, 1987; Stevenson, 1977; Van Lommel, 2010). Concepts such as “soul” and “spirit” are routinely used to describe human identity’s entire complexity and the multidimensional nature of life, mind, and consciousness (e.g., Assagioli, 1991; Cortright, 1997; Hardy, 1987; Yeomans, 1992).

Transpersonal psychologists who acknowledge these commitments may identify more with their intuitive self and with their imagination, and these to some extent direct the uses to which they put their physical senses and reasoning mind. They may believe that the whole Self carries its own comprehensions that can support the individual throughout all of his or her physical existence beyond what the ego with its physical senses and intellect can provide alone. They may recognize that some answers cannot be deduced from what is presently known and must gradually unfold as individuals rediscover a larger sense of personal identity that accepts the intuitions, feelings, and imagination as vital characteristics of personhood. They may regard remembered dreams, so-called goofs and mistakes, and those decision-making processes whose logic only appears in hindsight as indications of trans-rational creative problem solving and self-corrective actions that represent the free flow of information from other areas of the psyche, reassuring the reasoning mind of its deeper support by the personality’s greater natural body of knowledge found in the self beyond ego (Assagioli, 1991; Gowan, 1975; Washburn, 1995).

From the viewpoint of empirical rationalism, such propositions may be considered the most Pollyannaish of speculations and examples of irrational, counterfactual, and magical thinking unsubstantiated by the physical senses and inconsistent with scientifically established fact (Mandel, Hilton, & Catellani, 2005; Shermer, 2002; Vyse, 2013), and whose legitimacy and significance is currently beyond the awareness or perception of the culture of empirical rationalism because of its own preferred epistemological and ontological...
commitments (cf. Hartelius et al., 2013). From the viewpoint of transpersonal empiricism, however, these ideas are biologically pertinent for the physical health of the organism and generate the impetus for constructive psychosocial growth and spiritual development (Benor, 2001; Lawlis, 1996; Schlitz & Micozzi, 2005). As Maslow (1968) put it, “Without the transcendent and the transpersonal, we get sick, violent, and nihilistic, or else hopeless and apathetic” (p. iv).

Does Transpersonal Empiricism Reveal Actual Transcendent Realities?

The proposition that “transcendent realities cannot be empirically known” is both a true statement and a false statement. On the one hand, it is true inasmuch as (a) the meaning of the term “empirical” is confined to the data of sense, (b) what is “real” is narrowed to what is material, takes up physical space, and has measurable duration in time, and (c) what is “knowable” is limited to phenomena that are accessible to the physical senses and can be consensually validated by the experience of others. On the other hand, it is false to say that the existence of transcendent realities cannot be empirically known inasmuch as (a) the term “empirical” is expanded to include the data of consciousness (i.e., actions and events that occur within consciousness), (b) what is “real” embraces nonmaterial phenomena that do not take up physical space (e.g., a thought, an emotion, a dream), and (c) what is “knowable” incorporates phenomena that are accessible to intraceptive, inner ways of knowing including intuition (Kautz, 2005; Vaughan, 1979), extrasensory perception (Tart, 2009), active imagination (Johnson, 1986), meditation (Tart, 2001), trance (Masters & Houston, 1972), imaginal dialogues (Watkins, 2000), and first- and second-person approaches to the data of consciousness (e.g., Hart, Nelson, & Puhakka, 2000; Heron, 1998; Palmer, 1998; Varela & Shear, 1999).

The empiricism of intraceptive perceptual processes provides the necessary foundation for an adequate theory of knowledge for transpersonal psychology. Complementing the empiricism of the outer senses characteristic of empirical rationalism, the “inner senses” of transpersonal empiricism perceive psychological action as a whole instead of in bits and pieces, construct rather than deconstruct, are more spontaneous than planful, and follow emotional associations to a greater degree than logical cause-and-effect sequences of verbal thought. They work with images and symbols rather than words, which better enables them to see “the pattern that connects” and emotionally feel the content and validity of a concept.

These inner ways of knowing have accumulated their own collection of empirical evidence (i.e., grounded in experience) having its source in subconscious realms of the human psyche that disclose the existence of a larger version of metaphysical facts out of which the world of physical fact emerges (cf. Chittick, 1989; Corbin, 1969; Hollenback, 1996). Governments, societies, religions, the arts and sciences, and cultural achievements of all kinds are offshoots of ideas that originated in the larger factual reality of the imagination, for example. Daily waking experience is itself directed, maintained, and formed largely through the human imagination (Brann,
Imaginative theories and constructs such as Christianity’s concept of the sinful self, Darwin’s theory of evolution, and astronomy’s Big Bang Theory have literally shaped generations of people’s experience of self, others, and the universe.

Can subjective experience ever justify objective knowledge claims? Empirical rationalism’s declaration that one can never justify objective knowledge claims based on subjective experience is repudiated by the culture of transpersonal empiricism. It remains one of the most curious ironies in the history of modern psychology that the basis of an individual’s most intimate experience and the framework behind all organized forms of religious and political structures, cultures and civilizations, arts and sciences rests upon the reality of a subjective psyche that is not considered valid by the very academic discipline that was formed through its auspices (i.e., psychology). After all, it is individual (inter-) subjectivity that gave birth to the constructs of “empirical accessibility,” “consensual validation,” and “objectivity” in the first place and that continually infuses them with meaning.

Empirical rationalism’s “objective” knowledge claims are themselves grounded in the subjective sensory experience of individual perceivers and in the magnification of individual subjective reality that combines and enlarges to form consensual validation of shared events. It is through one’s own private experience that each individual contributes to and collectively forms the human cultural world in which consensual validation is sought. Ultimately, subjective experience is the only reality, even for empirical rationalism. It has always been the reasoning mind’s task to translate that inner knowledge of private experience and imagination outward to the world of sense, make it physically available, and put it to practical use.

The existence of other (transcendent) systems of reality beside the physical one is denied on a priori grounds in the monophasic culture of empirical rationalism “that privilege[s] experiences had in what is called ‘normal waking states’ as opposed to ‘alternate states’ such as dreaming, visions, drug trips, ritual enactments, and so forth” (Laughlin, 2013, pp. 43-44). Most “transcendent” experiences (i.e., that go beyond the present understanding of the comprehending ego), however, are either the result of or produce an altered state of consciousness in the percipient (Evans, 1987). Ferrer (2014) drew attention to the important but underdeveloped state-specific sciences proposed by Tart (1975) as one methodological pathway to the recovery of an empirical rationalism with a psyche.

To study a phenomenon adequately, one needs to immerse oneself in the medium in which the phenomenon occurs and train one’s faculties beyond their usual but undeveloped range of functioning. Many quite real phenomena (e.g., lucid dreaming; Gackenbach & LaBerge, 1988) cannot be perceived by physical senses but must be plunged into and experienced from within using one’s inner senses. Models of alternate states of consciousness are often based on an explanatory framework that gives a legitimate role to human imagination and human subjectivity in efforts to make sense of experience (Cardeña & Winkelman, 2011). This means that an integral approach utilizes both emic
(culture-specific) ways of knowing and etic (culture-general) research methods when assessing the validity of knowledge claims in the two cultures of transpersonal psychology (Berry, 1969; Roth, 2008).

Can the existence of transcendent realities be empirically known? Is belief in the existence of transcendent realities a rationally plausible one, and is there any empirical evidence or logical argument that they can be known? Williams James wrote, “If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white” (Murphy & Ballou, 1973, p. 41). Evidence exists that we have not one white crow but many, pointing to the distinctly real possibility that basic reality is profoundly multidimensional and can be experienced, understood, and affirmed as such (Barrow, Davies, & Harper, 2004; Bohm, 1980; Greene, 2011; Lewis, 1986).

I have written elsewhere about the rational plausibility of a basic reality that is infinitely creative and multidimensional in nature—a basic reality in which consciousness has causal relevance as an intrinsic aspect of physical matter and where the function of the material brain is to transmit (transmissive function) rather than produce (productive function) an essentially independent, non-material mind that exists as a form of electrical action within the electric system of reality (Cunningham, 2013). As a theory of consciousness, it is admittedly speculative as are all such theories and difficult to verify through consensual validation. However,

Even in the absence of intersubjective observation, there are numerous criteria available for the evaluation of such theories: simplicity, internal coherence, coherence with other theories in other domains, the ability to reproduce properties of experience that are familiar in our own case, and even an overall fit with the dictates of common sense. (Chalmers, 1997, p. 22)

What is noteworthy about this particular approach to the “hard problem” of consciousness is that it derives from a corpus of channeled writings (i.e., the Seth material of Jane Roberts and Robert Butts; Roberts, 1997-2002) that are arguably transpersonal in nature (Hastings, 1991) and that form a basis for the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of what has been termed the “New Age” movement (Hanegraff, 1998; Hughes, 1991; York, 2004). Whether or not one recognizes the ontological actuality of a theoretical Seth entity or acknowledges the rational plausibility of his independent existence as a personality-energy-gestalt [as he calls himself], will depend “on one’s conscious or unconscious metaphysical commitments” (Ferrer, 2014, p. 174). An author’s organic status or psychological constitution, however, is insufficient grounds and an inappropriate basis on which to accept or refute a particular hypothesis or a theory of consciousness, even in the culture of empirical rationalism.

Transpersonal empiricism is aligned with William James’ pragmatic criterion of truth and reality with regard to the question of whether transpersonal experiences reveal the existence of actual transcendental realities: “That which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself” (James, 1902/1936, p. 507). Like the dark matter theorized to be the major component
of the physical universe but that cannot be observed directly (Sanders, 2014),
the vitality of the universe is not itself perceived by the physical senses, but has
*effects* that are. Exceptional human experiences are not merely hypothetical
constructs or theoretical entities, but have practical consequences in the
physical world. When individuals experience them, observable effects may be
felt in the human personality (Palmer & Hastings, 2013; Ring, 2000).

On this account, we have no philosophic excuse for calling the Seth entity
unreal when it produces tangible effects in the human cultural world (Heelas,
1996), when people who interact with the Seth entity report work actually
being done upon their personalities (Watkins, 1999), and the communications
prove to be an internally coherent and rational source of information for
hypotheses about the nature of physical reality and human personality (cf.
Friedman, 1994). The communiqués are important not because they come from
Seth or because they are channeled by Jane Roberts but because they *may*
be communications from other dimensions of actuality telling the species about its
own nature. As such, the phenomenon offers its own kind of evidence for “the
ontological integrity of spiritual referents and the plausibility of subtle
dimensions of reality” (Ferrer, 2014, p. 174) and deserves further serious
study by transpersonal psychologists (Cunningham, 2012).

Ferrer (2014) discussed the epistemological challenge that shared entheogenic visions present to the transpersonal researcher. He argued that it is the
intersubjective or consensual agreement obtained among shared visual
perception of nonphysical entities that may be considered the hallmark of its
“objectivity” or “reality” (p. 173). I have reported elsewhere on a different
kind of *intersubjectively shared outer vision*—the collectively perceived
apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Medjugorje in the Republic of
Bosnia-Herzegovina of the former Yugoslavia (Cunningham, 2011b). Collectively perceived apparitions are one of the most provocative subsets of psychic
phenomena catalogued in the history of parapsychological research because of
their pseudo-material features, which may include casting a shadow, occluding
the view of background objects and being occluded by foreground objects,
detection by animals, reflection in mirrors, making responsive adjustments to
people and objects, and capacity to be viewed from different positions with
 corresponding differences in perception (Sidgwick, 1962; Stevenson, 1982).

Such encounter experiences present a curious mixture of subjective and
objective elements and are often accompanied by consensually validated
evidence that telepathy on the part of the living, the dying, or the dead may be
involved (Myers, 1889; Tyrrell, 1942/1953). The semi-objective features and
intersubjective nature of these phenomena call into question commonly held
assumptions that such shared visions are purely subjective, exclusively
pathological, or merely physiological. They offer empirical evidence for
a second “white crow” and “the ontological integrity of spiritual referents and
the plausibility of subtle dimensions of reality” (Ferrer, 2014, p. 174). To call
such psychical phenomena “supernatural” is beside the point, since they occur
within the natural framework and a part of the physical system of reality and
not outside of it.
Open naturalism. The world of nature with its diverse flora and fauna has become so strongly identified with the physical elements that compose it and with its exterior form that the term “naturalistic” has come to refer to its material aspects alone. From the standpoint of transpersonal empiricism, however, the conceptual distinctions between natural and supernatural, material and non-material, physical and metaphysical are false dichotomies differentiated for convenience only. Just as transpersonal psychology does not stand outside of the personal but includes it, so also the supernatural does not stand outside the natural but includes it and transcends it.

Nature is “super natural” (Kripal, 2014, p. 172) in the sense that the natural world cannot be its own source (Bohm, 1980). The world of nature is a miraculous physical system, and what the empirical rationalism of the physical and natural sciences learns about its wondrous properties and complex structure is meant to lead the species to question its own source and into the nature of the soul (Roberts, 1979). Categorical divisions between natural and supernatural do not operate in such a worldview.

Mind and body, body and world, personal self and transpersonal self are complex, interweaving actions that are natural and supernatural at once. The mind is as physical as the body, and the body is as mental as the mind. The spirit speaks with a physical voice, and the physical body is a creation of the spirit. We do not live outside reality or the world, outside our psyche and our body, but within them (Chermero, 2009; Noê, 2009; Shapiro, 2014). Only when they are viewed as radically different things, does the Cartesian gap between material and immaterial actualities and the neo-Kantian divide between knowable and unknowable realities seem unbridgeable and their crossing incomprehensible.

Panpsychism. The ontology of mind known as panpsychism has been advocated by some of the greatest thinkers in Eastern and Western civilization (Skrbina, 2005) and deserves serious consideration by transpersonal psychologists who are looking for an ontology that “bridges the epistemic gap between human experience and reality that is intrinsic to neo-Kantianism” (Ferrer, 2014, p. 169). On this view, transcendentional realities can be empirically known (i.e., through experience) because both the knower (noesis) and the known (noema) have the same source and are composed of the same “stuff.” That stuff is the inner vitality of consciousness and is known by many names—élan vital (Bergson, 1911), chi (Chinese), prana (Indian), mana (Polynesian), wakonda (Lakota Sioux), and pneuma (ancient Greek). Human beings are not separated from the rest of the natural world by virtue of possessing an inner consciousness but are part of a basic reality in which such consciousness permeates all forms of life, including so-called “non-living” entities. To say that all matter possesses consciousness is not to personify physical matter with human traits, but to affirm that human traits are the result of physical matter’s characteristics.

When one critically considers the possibility that consciousness has causal relevance as an intrinsic aspect of physical matter and goes “all the way down”
to the most basic elements of matter itself (de Quincey, 2002; Nagel, 2012; Pfeiffer, Mack, & Devereux, 2007), one can understand how matter and consciousness may both emerge out of what the world is and that despite physical appearances to the contrary, each is a materialization of the other. If mysticism is “an ocean with many shores” (Ferrer, 2002, pp. 144-149), then “our normal waking consciousness is a part of that mystic ocean all the time, composed of the same ingredients, participating in its motions” (Roberts, 1976, p. 296). Panpsychism represents a metaphysical commitment that forbids a premature closing of our understanding of how transcendent experiences can reveal actual transcendent realities.

According to the ontology of panpsychism, consciousness not only created the physical universe, but also continues to do so on a subconscious basis by every individual identity in it—mineral, plant, and animal. The condensed gestalt comprehension of electrons and protons forming atoms, atoms forming molecules, molecules forming cells, cells forming organs, and organs forming organisms result in different kinds of “interior” natures, different qualities of experience, and different ways of perceiving basic reality—a true “plurality of enacted spiritual worlds” (Ferrer, 2014, p. 168). Building upon and extending Ferrer’s (2002) insight that stresses human cocreation in the enaction of religious worlds, panpsychism discloses nonhuman cocreation in the enaction of the physical world. Not only humans, but all forms of life, great and small, contribute to the formation of the physical universe and are “vehicles through which reality or being self-manifests... [and] directly participate in the self-disclosure of the world” (Ferrer, 2014, p. 159).

Beyond Ontological Neutrality to Noetic Pluralism

**Basic reality.** Modern altered state of consciousness research has revealed that “reality” is experienced very differently according to the perceptual apparatus, focus of consciousness, and layer of the psyche to which the individual has access (Grof, 2013). Altered state of consciousness research also suggests the possibility that the intraceptive perceptual processes that operate during transpersonal experiences of transcendent realities (e.g., the Seth entity channeled by Jane Roberts, the prolonged Marian apparition at Medjugorje) may be analogous to transduction processes that occur during sensory perception of physical reality but at another level. The human act of perception transduces *that which is perceived* of transcendent reality into a “packaged” form that the comprehending ego can understand. The act of transduction creates a new basic reality and *that* is what is perceived—a new reality whose legitimacy and basis for existence lies in the perception of it (Roberts, 1997-2002).

On this view, that which is experienced as transcendent reality is thus a product of perception while always remaining “that which is” and the basis of new perceptions and new realities. Every organism’s perceptual and conceptual apparatus responds to the available field of stimulus energies in highly individualistic ways to reveal a *different* probable aspect of basic reality—
a creative and legitimate version that is produced by the very act of perceiving it. There are as many probable transcendent realities as there are individuals who encounter and experience them—an epistemological position William James called “noetic pluralism” (James, 1909/1971; Taylor, 1996, p. 134).

From one point of view of *transpersonal* empiricism, there is no single physical environment that each species simply perceives differently, as the objectivism of empirical rationalism presumes (Megill, 1994). The physical environment is not a separate thing divorced from the perceiver but a dynamic field of energy whose perception is the result of a highly specialized set of senses and perceptual patterns determined by psychological structures (Noë, 2009). The physical world rises up before our eyes while those eyes are a part of the world they perceive. On this view, basic reality is not a pre-established, completed thing in which all one needs to do to know it *as it is* is to take a really good look at what is “already out there now real” (Lonergan, 1957, pp. 250-254). Nor is it a static entity or completed act that simply recreates itself *as it is* in various guises. Basic reality is more profoundly participatory than this. The difficulty is that empirical rationalism does not appreciate the full extent to which the perceiver and basic reality co-create each other, or the full degree to which subjective continuity is always a part of any reality that is perceived and interpreted (Bernstein, 1985; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008).

On the one hand, basic reality *is*, whether or not it is perceived and is not dependent upon our belief in order that it can exist. On the other hand, basic reality is an ever-present, creative, latent, undifferentiated field of action that is forever acting upon itself, always in the process of creation, constantly forming from itself new probable versions of itself, manifesting and actualizing these new possibilities spontaneously and instantaneously. Continually growing in terms of knowledge of itself and endlessly expanding in its fulfillment of Being-values, basic reality ensures its own stability and permanency through such constant change (Roberts, 1997-2002).

The view advanced here is aligned with Ferrer’s (2002, 2008) participatory spirituality in that it affirms “an undetermined mystery or creative power as the generative source of all spiritual enactions” (Ferrer, 2014, p. 168) called basic reality. In contrast with Ferrer’s (2002) view that basic reality itself is not pregiven, however, the present view affirms that there *is* “something” out there—for the ever-actual integrity of the natural world is not to be denied and contains within itself its own recognition of itself. The *form* that “something” takes, however, is not pre-given. Basic reality springs into being as the spectrum of consciousness encounters it and patterns it according to its own perceptive focus. Each encounter adds to basic reality and gives rise to new basic realities, bringing forth new aspects of itself and of the consciousness that encounters it. Any given encounter, therefore, does not necessarily lead to an essentially “final” manifestation or expression of basic reality. Each transpersonal or transcendent experience automatically gives rise to a new basic reality. There is no end to transcendent realities in these terms or to their source or to their supply because basic reality expands through such
encounters. Through such encounters, basic reality renews itself and knows its
own reality.

In order to be perceived at all, basic reality must be tailored to some extent
according to the perceiver’s own purposes and needs. Sifted through the
perceiver’s own individuality, basic reality becomes manifested in sensory
images personally tailored for the perceiver and that others do not perceive
because of their different perceptive focus. One person experiences one
probable event as felt reality, while someone else may experience a version of
that event that becomes that individual’s felt reality. Each aspect of
transcendent basic reality may be quite different, and the separate
interpretations made be quite valid explanations of the separate variations.
After all, if photographs of the exterior physical world vary according to
who, when, where, and how the picture is taken, then why should pictures or
experiences of interior nonphysical realities be expected or required to look
alike?

One transcendent reality may exist in many different ways in the same way that
flowers behave differently in different circumstances. Flowers can be white or
red, tall or short, found in a tree or on the ground or in a vase without being
contradictory to the nature of a flower. If the reasoning mind makes its
deductions according to a single consensually validated picture of a flower,
there will be correlations that apply—but only to that small specific and limited
area. The oftentimes greater dissimilarities in experience are overlooked.

The individual’s experience is not false but creative and an interpretation of
basic reality experienced through a state of limited perception and filtered
through the subconscious of the experiencing subject. Personal experiences and
private interpretations of encounters with so-called transcendent realities are
not therefore unreal and “mistaken,” but represent one of an infinite number of
ways of perceiving the various probable guises that basic reality takes. The
perceiver experiences a representation or symbol, but the symbol is quite real
and a quite valid aspect of basic reality. Behind the representations, however,
are larger “unknown” multidimensional realities.

Understanding the nature of such a basic reality can move transpersonal
psychology beyond its current Two Culture syndrome and avoid the
fragmented, specialized, and sometimes contradictory and mutually-exclusive
explanation of human experience and behavior that has come to characterize
modern scientific psychology (Koch, 1993; Staats, 1991). The two epistemic
cultures of transpersonal psychology—empirical rationalism and transpersonal
empiricism—challenge each other in different ways with ontological, episte-
mological, and axiological commitments that seem to be opposite, but are
instead different ways of exploring different aspects of the same overall basic
reality and merge for common purposes in a single academic field. “Only by
such a comprehensive approach can we hope for a vision that reflects the
extraordinary richness and possibilities of humankind and the cosmos:
a transpersonal vision” (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a, p. 205).
Conclusion: Bridging Psychological Science and Transpersonal Spirit

The two counterparts of transpersonal psychology can learn much from each other and can merge, while retaining their unique identities, to form a more robust transpersonal psychology able to cast new light on their combined purposes. The inherent flexibility, playfulness, and creativity of the human mind has allowed the species great variation in its psychological, cultural, political, and religious activities, and it is these qualities that can be counted on to bring what appears to be two opposing paradigms within transpersonal psychology together into a more harmonious synergy.

Understanding that prime freedom, Ferrer (2014) invited us to consider “the plausibility of a deep and ample multidimensional cosmos in which the sensible world (as narrowly conceived by modern naturalism) does not exhaust the possibilities of the Real” (p. 170) (italics in the original). Transpersonal empiricism encourages empirical rationalism to take a more generous view of the nature of reality as a way of making sense of the broadest spectrum of human experience and behavior. From the viewpoint of transpersonal empiricism that is presented here, if transpersonal psychology is to persevere as a “higher” psychology, it needs to retain its vision of itself as a psychology that is “transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like” (Maslow, 1968, p. iv). It needs to retain a view of reality that is “bigger than we are” that we can “commit ourselves to in a new, naturalistic, empirical, non-churchly sense, perhaps as Thoreau and Whitman, William James, and John Dewey did” (Maslow, 1968, p. iv).

**Ontic pluralism.** First of all, it would help to attempt a larger view of reality. As long as physical existence is categorically believed to be the only valid one—existence in a material body that experiences a sensorily accessible, consensually validated, “already-out-there-now-real” world (Lonergan, 1957, pp. 250-254)—then the search for nonphysical or subtle transcendent realities will not occur. Reality is not limited; it is only our perception that is limited within the framework of three-dimensional physical reality.

The fact is that science must change, as it discovers its net of evidence is equipped only to catch certain kinds of fish, and that it is constructed of webs of assumptions that can only hold certain varieties of reality, while others escape its net entirely. (Roberts, 1981, p. 137)

To admit as evidence only data accessible to physical senses and consensually validated in the experience of others is an extreme form of parsimony that is simplicity itself, producing a body of knowledge that may lack full validity since only half or maybe a third of basic reality may be actually considered.

**Psychical pluralism.** Second, the inner attitude toward human subjectivity on the part of empirical rationalism must be completely changed, although the scientific method need not necessarily change. The version of psychological science that the culture of empirical rationalism represents does have the right to
set its own rules of empirical accessibility, consensual validation, repeatability and falsifiability, but not set itself up as the final arbiter of reality. The time has come for the culture of empirical rationalism in transpersonal psychology to take several steps further “beyond ego” to expand the nature of its own knowing and consider more profound enactions of reality that it presently either does not consciously perceive or of which it is not consciously aware.

Expanding the boundaries of experience and knowledge beyond the margins of normal waking consciousness in the form of an experimental psychology of the unconscious may give some legitimacy to the reality of multiple states of consciousness and multiplex models of human personality in the eyes of empirical-rationalistic science (Beahrs, 1982; Ellenberger, 1970; Kelly et al., 2007; Taylor, 1996). Such an expansion could ground logical arguments for more profound versions of reality and provide alternative frames of reference in which so-called anomalous phenomena can be more adequately explained (e.g., Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner; 2013).

**Epistemic pluralism.** Third, an expansion of the definition of “empiricism” to mean “experiential” more broadly (i.e., grounded in experience) would also help. Transpersonal empiricism is aligned with Ferrer’s (2014) call for a naturalism that is “[open] to the heuristic value and potential validity of alternate epistemic and metaphysical frameworks...[such that] multiple methodological standpoints, epistemologies, and metaphysical frameworks could be considered to discern the more appropriate account of the perceived phenomena” (pp. 174-175). This is what transpersonal psychology has historically done (Anderson & Braud, 2013). Sensory data accessible to experience via physical senses is only one of several equally legitimate types of empiricism. “Experience” legitimately and logically includes the data of consciousness (e.g., mental images, thoughts, dreams, feelings) perceived by inner methods of perception that are equipped to apprehend data as they exist independently of the transformations imposed upon them by physical senses.

**The transpersonal vision.** The form that transpersonal psychology takes at any given moment in time is extremely important, but forms change constantly, and the form of transpersonal psychology that Maslow and others initiated in 1969 is not the same form of transpersonal psychology today. The definitions of transpersonal psychology likewise have evolved over the years to reflect this change in form and will likely continue to change in the future. But beneath each evolving definition and every changing form is what Walsh and Vaughan (1993b) described as the transpersonal vision. The field’s current form is already in transition as the transpersonal vision beneath is ever ready to adopt a new shape.

The two epistemic cultures of transpersonal psychology represent dual channels or mediums through which the transpersonal vision currently flows, each suggesting to some degree its own form of the field. The transpersonal vision that flows through each culture is highly individual, reflecting the interests and styles of thinking of each of its members who embody that vision in physical terms. The development of transpersonal psychology in this way
comes naturally from within its members, even while the general form of these visions follow along certain lines that I have attempted to characterize as the two “cultures” of transpersonal psychology.

Each culture gives direction to each member’s uniquely original style of thinking and each culture is the result of each member’s own transpersonal vision freely followed. In order to accomplish a meaningful bridging of psychological science and transpersonal spirit it is important, therefore, to give the transpersonal vision its own freedom. The transpersonal vision implies and sometimes even dictates its own form, but the form of transpersonal psychology should always exist as an attribute of the vision and not be imposed upon it. The transpersonal vision must always be allowed freedom, for it is greater than its form. When the vision is given freedom to shape itself, then the form and vision become one.

Let us, then, concern ourselves with the transpersonal vision and let the form of transpersonal psychology take care of itself. By allowing the vision to freely express itself in form, and not attempting to impose any particular culture upon the vision, then the form of transpersonal psychology at any given moment will naturally grow out of the vision.

Our task, then, is to realize the transpersonal vision for ourselves through practicing a transpersonal discipline; to test and refine this vision through study, reflection and critical thinking; to embody and express it in our lives; to share and communicate it where we can; to use it to help the healing of our world; and to let it use us as willing servants for the wakening and welfare of all. This is the transpersonal vision. This is what we have been privileged to help birth during its first twenty-five years. Who can even guess what the next twenty-five years will bring? Our challenges are matched only by our opportunities. (Walsh, 1993, p. 136)

This kind of orientation can bridge the two epistemic cultures of transpersonal psychology and represents in my opinion the truest picture that can be given so far of transpersonal psychology’s natural relationship with itself and with the transpersonal vision that it seeks to actualize in the human cultural world.

REFERENCES


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