

Questioning the Role of Transpersonal Psychology

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“It is clear that there is a pressing need to bring these inter-related areas [of the transpersonal] under the scrutiny of properly constituted psychological enquiry. Much as the medical profession is now turning scientific scrutiny upon so-called complementary medicine in order that the wheat, if any, be separated from the chaff, so scientific psychology must put itself in a position to make authoritative pronouncements on the psychological efficacy or otherwise of the practices, techniques and traditions covered by the transpersonal area”.

Fontana & Slack, 1996a, p. 2.

In the attempt to establish transpersonal psychology as a distinctive and valid system of knowledge, it is obviously important to be able to demonstrate the need for this approach as well as to define clearly its terms of reference. Fontana & Slack (1996a, 1996b) have accomplished both tasks admirably and successfully, as evidenced by the recent (1996) creation of the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society. We applaud their efforts and celebrate with them the Section’s establishment. We also agree with much of their analysis. Appreciative feelings and the glow of success should not, however, blind us to issues that are problematic, that may remain unresolved, or may require further clarification.

The arguments illustrated by the quotation at the head of this article cause us certain misgivings and raise a number of important questions. What exactly is this “pressing need”? What kind of “scrutiny” is being suggested, and what is its purpose? How can scientific psychology put itself in a position to make the kind of “authoritative pronouncements” that are advocated? Even if scientific psychology could make such pronouncements, is this the legitimate role of transpersonal psychology?

In our opinion, we need to think very carefully about whether transpersonal psychology can or should claim the kind of authority that Fontana & Slack are suggesting. Although it may seem clear to psychologists concerned with transpersonal issues that there is a pressing need for psychologists to take charge of this area of human enquiry, the need may be less clear and pressing to non-psychologists. We should not forget that there are many others who might, with equal force, make similar claims – philosophers, quantum scientists, long-term spiritual practitioners, religious leaders and new age gurus. We also need to consider the perspectives and roles of the other “transpersonal disciplines” (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993) such as transpersonal sociology, transpersonal psychiatry, transpersonal anthropology and transpersonal ecology. On what basis can *psychology* claim special status within the transpersonal movement as a whole?

Fontana & Slack (1996a) are, apparently, very careful to suggest that the authority of transpersonal psychology is limited to the *psychological* efficacy of transpersonal practices, techniques and traditions. Elsewhere they argue, for example, that transpersonal psychology “should concern itself not with the truth or otherwise behind the experiences and beliefs concerned (which may lie outside the province of science), but with the psychological needs that appear to demand these experiences and beliefs, and with their impact upon the human behaviours that are the very stuff of scientific psychology” (Fontana & Slack, 1996b, p. 269).

We consider that this distinction is not as straightforward as it may appear. In the first place, the psychological dimensions of transpersonal beliefs, experiences and practices cannot, we believe, be neatly separated from the interpersonal, ethical, religious, existential or social-cultural aspects. People approach the transpersonal as whole (not just psychological) beings that inhabit a complex set of interconnected worlds (biological, intellectual, social, cultural, existential, spiritual, etc.). Their experience and activity cannot therefore be understood simply as the expression of psychological needs. Investigators could, of course, choose to examine only these psychological

aspects, but then the very essence and meaning of transpersonal experience would be lost in the process. In Wilber's terminology (e.g., 1995, 1996) we would end up with a distinctly "flatland" approach to the transpersonal that ignores certain important "quadrants" of human experience (cf. Daniels, 1997).

In fact, if we examine Fontana & Slack's arguments more carefully, it becomes clear that they wish to claim more than merely the investigation of, or commentary upon, the specifically psychological aspects of the transpersonal. One way in which we read the sub-text of their statements is that, because of its unique academic or "scientific" status, psychology may claim a special, even pre-eminent authority on matters transpersonal. The scope of this authority might include, for example, the role of evaluating, possibly even helping to police, the areas of personal growth and the transpersonal. Thus they admit that "the present authors are very concerned at the extent to which whole areas of human functioning which are properly the concern of scientific psychology are currently being taken over from outside by the exponential growth of lay initiatives and movements claiming to foster personal growth, self-awareness, spirituality, creativity, the 'higher self' and other pretentious-sounding human qualities" (Fontana & Slack, 1996b, p. 269).

Is this, perhaps, the crux of the matter? Are Fontana & Slack primarily concerned that someone else might "take over" and claim an authority in these areas that they believe rightfully belongs to scientific psychology? We sympathise with and share Fontana & Slack's concern over much of the activity that is associated with the areas of personal growth and spirituality. We are not convinced, however, that the most appropriate response and remedy is for *any* particular group or approach (no matter how "worthy" its claim may appear) to usurp absolute authority and to dismiss all other, "lay," claims as invalid. It could well be argued that the practices, techniques and traditions that make up the field of the transpersonal have in many cases evolved in spite of such authority, or perhaps where there has historically and

culturally been no strict gatekeeper or final arbiter of efficacy. A danger, therefore, is that the attempt to establish a new authority in these areas may lead to a stifling of creativity, innovation and risk-taking. It may also lead to a suspicion and distrust of those who would claim this authority.

It is interesting that Fontana & Slack (1996a, 1996b) should cite the experience of the medical establishment in support of their argument. Thus they suggest that, with the increasing interest in so-called complementary medicine, the medical profession can and should act to keep the public “properly informed as to the validity of the claims and counter-claims being made” (1996b, p. 269). However there are a number of good reasons to question whether the medical establishment is in a valid position to make these kinds of judgements. Most importantly, perhaps is the clear and massive self-interest that the medical profession has in this field. A prime motive for the medical establishment is therefore to maintain and extend the assertion of its right to be the absolute authority on all issues of health and sickness. If Fontana & Slack seek to manoeuvre scientific psychology into a similar position of absolute power and authority in relation to the transpersonal, then many, including ourselves, would seriously question the validity and wisdom of this political agenda.

Wilber (1993, p. 265) has argued that “the transpersonal field is uniquely situated to synthesise and integrate various fields in humanity’s knowledge quest, simply because it is the one field that is uniquely dedicated to exploring, honouring, and acknowledging all the dimensions of men and women’s experience”. This implies that the transpersonal should be approached in a multidimensional and multidisciplinary fashion. A strictly *psychological* approach is therefore unlikely to be able to accommodate such a synthesis (Daniels, 1997). Even if it could (which we doubt), a further problem is that psychologists do not always agree upon what constitutes “properly constituted psychological enquiry” (Fontana & Slack, 1996a, p. 2). Fontana & Slack themselves argue for “scientific” methods of enquiry which

they believe will enable psychology to make “authoritative pronouncements” in the area of the transpersonal. But what kind of science is able to do this?

Walsh & Vaughan (1993) help to clarify the nature and scale of this problem. They argue that “to date, the transpersonal disciplines stand alone in adopting an eclectic epistemology that seeks to include science, philosophy, introspection, and contemplation and to integrate them in a comprehensive investigation adequate to the many dimensions of human experience and human nature” (p. 5). These dimensions include “consciousness and altered states, mythology, meditation, yoga, mysticism, lucid dreaming, psychedelics, values, ethics, relationships, emotional capacities and psychological well-being, transconventional development, transpersonal emotions, such as love and compassion, motives such as altruism and service, and transpersonal pathologies and therapies” (ibid., p. 5). Quite a list! Does psychology as a discipline possess the necessary synthesising qualities to encompass all of this within a single epistemological framework? On the contrary, to the extent that a scientific transpersonal psychology could be seen as advocating a monolithic epistemology, there is a clear danger that it may develop into a limited, parochial approach that is incapable of encompassing and doing justice to the variety and richness of transpersonal experience.

In this context, we would like to consider a more interesting and benign interpretation of Fontana & Slack’s suggestion that scientific psychology should “put itself in a position” to make authoritative pronouncements on the transpersonal. This benign interpretation is one that creatively pushes the boundaries of science. Thus their statement could be taken to mean that scientific psychology needs to revise the way in which it operates so that it can investigate the area of the transpersonal more effectively and authoritatively. From this perspective, the proposal to incorporate the transpersonal within scientific psychology may be seen as an opportunity and challenge - i.e., to refine or redefine our notion of science and scientific method in a way that may enable a more encompassing and synthesising

epistemology. Harman (1993, p. 139) reminds us that “the scientist who would explore the topic of consciousness ... must be *willing to risk being transformed* in the process of exploration” (original italics). This creative risk, we believe, applies not only to the scientist, but also to science itself.

The traditional model of science has increasingly suffered in the post-modern intellectual climate, where it has often been criticised as the child of Cartesian dualism and the vehicle of materialistic reductionism. There is no doubt that much scientific activity can be described in this way. Foster (1996, p. 63) suggests, however, that “it is the commercial appropriation and political opportunism of science which has grown to be so hazardous and such a source of global rancour, not the method *per se*, nor the achievements of its finest exemplars”. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, there is undoubtedly to be found in the empirical method of science a valuable structure for interpreting the world in which we live. Although the major successes of science have been in furthering our understanding of the physical world, it would be incautious to dismiss out-of-hand its potential relevance to the transpersonal. Claxton (1994) argues, for example, that whilst science may not have all the answers, it does provide our best bet for furthering understanding of the transpersonal - “spirituality is a phenomenon of whole human beings embedded in their biological and social worlds, and it is therefore from the shores of brain science, evolutionary biology, and transpersonal psychology that we have to build out towards the far bank of mystery” (pp. x-xi).

What is unfortunate is that the hegemony of science has excluded other systems of knowledge from making their full contribution to a cosmological understanding because these other offerings do not stand the tests of science, as if science were the only route to truth. If knowledge is to advance, perhaps we shall need to find ways of openly admitting the contributions of other, non-scientific, approaches – approaches that may have their origins in diverse times and cultures. Thus Goleman (1993, p. 18) advises us that we should be willing to turn to these other systems of knowledge “not as

curiosities to be studied from our own vantage point, but as alternative lenses through which we may be allowed visions and insights which our own psychological viewpoints might obscure". In relation to the transpersonal, these non-scientific approaches might include, for example, yoga, Buddhist psychology, Gnosticism, the western mystery traditions, and the paths of shamanic experience, meditative consciousness and mystical illumination.

As a relatively young discipline, so dependent for its self-validation upon scientific methods of enquiry, psychology may not yet feel mature enough to risk extending its search for an understanding of the transpersonal beyond the traditional scientific approaches. Rather in the way that Goleman (1996, p. xi) reveals that he had to wait to write about emotional intelligence until "the scientific harvest was full enough", perhaps psychology will need to wait until science itself has matured sufficiently in order to expand its brief to incorporate these more diverse approaches to knowledge. The new paradigms in science are now beginning to ask new questions, born of the realisation that the old paradigms may have led humankind down a dangerously narrow road. Lutzenberger (1994, p. 10) argues, for example, that "one of the greatest moral disasters in human history has been the disconnection between science and philosophy. Science brings knowledge, philosophy brings wisdom. We need both". Our discussion suggests that perhaps we need more than both.

We are reminded here of Wilber's (1979) discussion of the "three eyes of the soul". Wilber suggests (following St. Bonaventure) that there are three possible routes to knowledge, represented by the eye of flesh, the eye of reason, and the eye of contemplation. Not only does each eye have its own distinct objects of knowledge (sensory, mental or transcendental), but the knowledge obtained by one eye cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of the knowledge appropriate to another eye. Each eye is valid and useful in its own field, but commits a fallacy or category error when it attempts, by itself, to fully grasp the other realms. This implies that a traditional scientific approach, based solely upon the eyes of the flesh and reason, cannot hope to provide

us with values or ethics or true transcendental insight. Wilber's analysis therefore leads us to question the faith that Fontana & Slack seem to have in the ability of a strictly "two-eyed" scientific psychology to investigate fully the area of the transpersonal.

For a "scientific" psychology to reveal the true nature of the transpersonal it will need to find ways of moving beyond the narrow established scientific paradigms, "out of the dense forest of Newtonian thought toward the ranging freedom of Quantum Consciousness" (Wolinsky 1993, p. 17). Much of what we call enlightenment is illuminated from within, not from "out there". Insight is precisely sight of that which is within. Science has historically looked without for answers; it now needs to look within. A scientific transpersonal psychology may be possible, but only if it is willing to extend and redefine our understanding of science in a way that admits the inner eye of contemplation. If this proves impossible, then we will need to recognise that transpersonal psychology may be capable of providing only a restricted perspective with consequently limited "authority".

Even if transpersonal psychology could find ways to incorporate the inner eye of contemplation, it would still remain an incomplete approach unless it could also find ways to honour and connect with other approaches that are, perhaps, better situated to examine certain other of Wilber's (1995, 1996) "quadrants" (e.g., the interior-collective and exterior-collective). As Walsh and Vaughan (1993) have argued, perhaps we need to think more in terms of a "transpersonal movement" that incorporates, for example, transpersonal ecology, transpersonal psychology, transpersonal sociology, and transpersonal anthropology, rather than seeing transpersonal *psychology* as able to provide all the answers.

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