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Everything and Nothing: Spiritual intersubjectivity as a counterpoint to transpersonal narcissism

Dwight Turner

SUMMARY: This article examines the quest for a more participatory exploration of the transpersonal, while acknowledging the dangers of 'ethnocentric imperialism'.

KEY WORDS: Spirituality, transpersonal, ethno-centrism, othering

On researching a paper to present at a recent conference on the Transpersonal I was struck by two things: firstly just how many spiritual beliefs sit outside the traditional transpersonal West–East dyad, and how in this non-inclusivity numerous spiritual others have been created, for example the spiritual practices of indigenous cultures in New Zealand (Mark & Lyons, 2010) or the numerous spiritual practices from Africa (Mbiti, 1989; Oppenheim, 2012). The second aspect that struck me was that given the religious oppression of colonial times how many religious practices were forced to conform to a more Christian way of expression of their faith in order to survive. For example, Candomble in Brazil which was practiced by slaves of West African descent was only permitted once it adopted rituals enforced upon it by Christian missionaries (Van De Port, 2005). It is this type of spiritual othering, where the other submits to the more powerful majority, that I hope to address here as my sense is there is still a damagingly thick vein of this which sits within the transpersonal.

Ferrer (2002), in his quest for a more participatory exploration of the transpersonal, acknowledges the dangers of a type of 'ethnocentric imperialism' (p. 52). For this article, this I feel underlines some of the unconscious problems the transpersonal has perhaps not addressed in its attempt (or not) to move beyond the very real religious shackles left behind by the fall of Colonialism.

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Approaching transpersonal narcissism from a more personal perspective, Walach goes further in his expression, 'Ego-inflation and the Moses complex are the two poles between which the spiritual path winds. The point I wish to make in this paper is that they are two sides of one coin: narcissism' (2008, p. 47). The philosopher Levinas offers something of huge importance to my own understanding of transpersonal narcissism when he says 'the desperate person who wills nothingness or eternal life pronounces a total refusal of the here below' (Levinas, 1961, p. 41). Here Levinas seems to understand the split between grandiosity and over-humility, recognising that it distances itself from the third perspective, the other.

To expand on this point, both of these narcissistic positions aim to maintain a sense of spiritual superiority. This is the danger for the transpersonal – because of this need for superiority both positions create a spiritual other, where spiritual beliefs and experiences that might often be dismissed as no such thing then sit outside of the understanding of the transpersonal. Examples of these can include more indigenous forms of spirituality mentioned earlier, or in the modern era spiritual experiences involving, for example, the use of psychedelics.

My own understanding of transpersonal narcissism is hinted at by Levinas. It is my belief that spiritual narcissism is either a futile attempt at the everythingness and grandiosity of eternal life, or conversely the tentative attempt at the false humility of nothingness, both of these being based upon the need of the validation of an external other. I also believe that this sense of being constructed here, in both of the means suggested by Walach and Levinas, is built in order to maintain a sense of spiritual superiority and ultimately avoid the relational aspect that they both clearly suggest sits in between. Ultimately, the spiritual narcissist in an attempt to avoid true relatedness presents a face of pseudo-grandiosity or humility that ultimately prevents the external other from witnessing the truth of whatever is going on for him/her/them, and thereby stops one from forming a relationship with a deeper sense of self. Also, what really happens when the spiritual narcissist takes the position of being all knowing, or everything, is that he/she/they are taking on the spiritual position of being Everything. This then casts the other into the shadow, or into a position here of being Nothing. Ultimately then, in protecting itself from the other, the spiritual narcissist is actually shielding itself from its own nothingness

To counter this narcissism ideas tying in intersubjectivity and creativity become more important. 'Intersubjectivity' is the space between that which is and that which is not (Buber, 1992), meaning here that on a human level individuals, and groups, need to be able to hold the position of being both. Turning to its tie to creativity, it is the true artist who is able to transcend this narcissistic splitting of everythingness and nothingness. As the Japanese philosopher Kitaro

acknowledges ‘the absolute is self-contradictory’. It absolutely negates itself in itself.’ (1989, p. 49), highlighting the important spiritual contradiction between everything and nothing. This is a perspective key to the Kabbalistic tradition, where ‘G-d is nothingness and everythingness’ (Berke & Schneider, 2007, p. 335); G-d balances both poles perfectly, like the artist tries to do within her work. It is this attempt to relate to and balance inner and outer reality that I feel is hugely relevant in our continued attempts to understand our relationship to the other. I also strongly believe that this balancing act, when achieved, is as Buber suggested, a very important path towards understanding our spirituality.

It is also necessary for the transpersonal narcissist to counter a need for spiritual superiority and hold the realisation that personal experiences are valid, whilst the spiritual experiences of others, whilst maybe not from a similar position, are equally valid. This is the holding of everything and nothingness, or the combination of ego inflation and the Moses complex, that I feel by bridging the gap between the two, and holding the intersubjective space between subject and the spiritual other, ultimately bring us closer to a form of the divine and our own spiritual sense of being.

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