



The Transpersonal

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What we shall be looking at in this book is the position of the transpersonal. The view being put forward here is that this is a position at which all counsellors and psychotherapists work some of the time, though they may be unaware of it, and may not think of it in those terms. It will be argued that just as we speak prose without necessarily giving it that label, so also do we communicate from a transpersonal position without necessarily calling it that.

What is this transpersonal position? There are three reasons why it is difficult to give a quick definition of it.

1. It is not an ego function, and the language in which we write books is an ego function. So the language in which we write books, which we might call

ordinary language, essentially deals with ego functions of one kind and another. Ordinary language, then, misses something essential about it, and hence falsifies it to some degree.

2. It has to do with spirituality, and our culture has a curious attitude to spirituality, either dismissing it altogether as a primitive misunderstanding, or regarding it as something very religious and very special, the domain of the priest or the saint. We may be very aware of fakers and frauds claiming to be spiritual in their efforts to exploit people. In any case it is not for us, as ordinary people, as counsellors, therapists or psychologists.

3. When we first come across it for ourselves as an actual experience, it usually seems to us holy and ultimate, and it

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seems then something of a desecration to try to talk about it in everyday terms. Yet we know that many other things which seemed to us quite superhuman and marvellous when we first came across them do later tend to seem more ordinary.

In spite of these drawbacks, it seems that it must be worthwhile to attempt at least a first approximation to a definition of the transpersonal. The most succinct version I have come across comes from Stanislav Grof. He says that transpersonal experiences can be defined as "experiences involving an expansion or extension of consciousness beyond the usual ego boundaries and beyond the limitations of time and/or space" (Grof, 1979, p. 155).

This at least puts us into the right general area. Just as paying attention to the intellectual content of a person's discourse puts us into one realm of consciousness, and paying attention to the emotional content of that person's discourse puts us into another realm of consciousness, and paying attention to the unconscious aspects of a person's discourse and actions puts us into another realm of consciousness, now we are saying that there are other realms, of which the transpersonal is one. Frances Vaughan puts it very well when she says (Walsh and Vaughan 1980, p. 11): "The transpersonal perspective holds that a large spectrum of altered states of consciousness exist, that some are potentially useful and functionally specific (*i.e.* possessing some functions not available in the usual state but lacking others) and that some of these are true 'higher' states. Higher is here used in Tart's (1973, 1975) sense of possessing all the proper-

ties and potentials of lower states, plus some additional ones. Furthermore, a wide range of literature from a variety of cultures and growth disciplines attests to the attainability of these higher states."

This talk of 'higher' states may make us nervous, but they are not higher in the sense of being unattainable or requiring great dedication to attain. They are potentially present in all of us, and have to do with things like intuition, creativity, imagination and the like. They are part of being human, and even children may have access to them (Cohen and Phipps, 1979).

The Pre/Trans Fallacy

A useful distinction has been made between what is transpersonal and what is prepersonal. The transpersonal goes beyond the personal (the limited, the ego-bound, the everyday world of ordinary discourse); the prepersonal has not yet reached the personal, and is more limited than the personal. Wilber (1983) says that to confuse these two is to commit the pre/trans fallacy. Yet the confusion is very common. Someone who is firmly fixed in the middle position (the personal, the everyday consciousness, consensus reality, what Wilber calls the Mental Ego position) may very often see anything other than that as inferior to that. For example, someone who is wedded to the model of there being just the conscious and the unconscious minds will tend to see the transpersonal as just another example of material from the unconscious, and therefore as essentially prepersonal. Someone who only distinguishes between the intellectual and the emotional may see the transpersonal

as just another part of the emotional realm, and misjudge it in that way.

Someone who is firmly fixed at the ego-bound personal position and wants to steer clear of both the prepersonal and the transpersonal is committed (though perhaps not aware of the fact) to Aristotelian logic. Anything which goes outside Aristotelian logic (A is A, A is not not-A, nothing can be A and not-A at the same time), it seems to such a person, must be irrational. It is true that someone may not have reached an understanding of Aristotelian logic, and may be irrational in that sense; that would be an example of the prepersonal, not of the transpersonal. If someone, or a group of people, were to deny Aristotelian logic by preferring something more primitive or less demanding, such as magical thinking or tribal thinking, this would be prepersonal, and Wilber (1981) has a long discussion of this in historical terms.

The transpersonal, on the other hand, goes beyond Aristotelian logic, and starts to be interested in dialectical logic, process logic, many-valued logic, fuzzy logic and so forth — all sorts of variations which show that Aristotelian logic is a choice, not an inevitable law of thought. (The Boolean logic which underlies most computer programs is based on the

Aristotelian model.) When we are working from the transpersonal position it makes sense to say that A is never simply A, and that if it were it could never change. It is only because A is not simply A that it has within it the potentiality for change.

To a psychotherapist or counsellor, this is meat and drink, or one of the basic facts of life. If Jane or Andrew were simply Jane or Andrew, they would be stuck with themselves for ever, and could never emerge from their stuck place. Perhaps not every therapist realises that they are denying Aristotelian logic every time they work for real change with a client, but this is one of the many instances of where we are working transpersonally without even realizing it.

This book is dealing with something of direct relevance to counsellors and therapists, not with the whole history of spirituality. Many of the people we have talked about in this book have been influenced by Eastern religion, paganism, Christianity, existentialism, etc, but this is not what we are about here. We are concerned with the theory and practice of the transpersonal, understood as a particular modern approach to spirituality, in relation to counselling and psychotherapy.

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