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The Problem of Suffering: Existential and Transpersonal Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: The philosophical foundations of existential and transpersonal psychologies are compared and contrasted. This examination focuses in particular on these approaches to the theme of human suffering. Suffering is here seen as being pervasive, and the sources of this pervasiveness are explicated. Then inauthentic and authentic responses to suffering are noted and analyzed, from both existential and transpersonal perspectives.

Existential and transpersonal disciplines have different origins but common concerns. Existentialism was born of continental philosophy out of an unflinching examination of the difficulties of human existence and authentic living. The transpersonal movement was born from psychology out of concerns with issues such as exceptional psychological health and transpersonal experiences as well as the effort to integrate perennial wisdom and contemporary knowledge. In this context, transpersonal experiences are understood as being those in which the sense of identity or self extends

beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche and cosmos.

Yet though their origins are different their concerns are similar and they have much to contribute to each other. Both of them emphasize a practical focus on those matters of deepest life importance, especially the causes and relief of suffering and what it means to live fully. As such they pay particular attention to the fundamental nature of our human condition; the ways in which we fall short of our possibilities, especially through entrapment in social illusion; the problem of suffering; and the ways in which we can most fully and fundamentally respond to these issues.

In this paper I would like to explore four topics that are centrally related to these issues:

1. The idea that our usual human condition is in some way deficient, lacking and imbued with suffering.
2. The seduction of conventionality (the herd or the consensus trance).
3. The claim that our usual ways of living are somehow inauthentic or somnambulistic.
4. Strategies and responses for authenticity or awakening.

In this brief paper I will not attempt to summarize the existential and transpersonal movements nor to provide the theoretical, phenomenological and experimental data underpinning the existential and transpersonal principles discussed here. Rather I will simply enunciate and compare the principles and refer readers to reviews of the two fields (some of the more readable include Barrett, 1958; Cooper, 1990; Vaughan, 1995a; Walsh, 1993; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a; Wilber, 1977, 1981, 1995 and Yalom, 1981).

The Unsatisfactoriness of Our Usual Human Condition.

Both traditions recognize a bewildering ambiguity and unsatisfactoriness at the heart of everyday life. For Heidegger we are "thrown" into a condition of ambiguity and alienation. There we confront boundary situations of aloneness, meaninglessness, responsibility and death. Consequently it is no surprise that existentialists claim that our underlying feeling tone is one of angst and that, as Nietzsche (1968, p. 269) put it as deeply as man sees into life, he also sees into suffering.

The transpersonal perspective is in full agreement with the existentialists in acknowledging the pervasiveness of ambiguity and angst and suggests that they have made a profound and accurate diagnosis of the fundamental feeling tone of *unenlightened* existence. It differs, however,

in its view of the varieties and origins of this unsatisfactoriness. Though it draws explicitly on the contemplative and sapiential (wisdom) dimensions of each of the great spiritual traditions, it is perhaps in Buddhism that it finds its most fruitful analyses of the varieties of suffering.

Buddhism particularly describes three kinds of suffering or unsatisfactoriness, namely, *dukkha dukkha*, *anicca dukkha* and *sankhara dukkha*. *Dukkha dukkha* is overt suffering such as sickness or trauma. *Anicca* is a pali term implying never ending change and impermanence and is said to be characteristic of all phenomena and life. Consequently *annica dukkha* is the unsatisfactoriness inherent in an existence forever subject to flux, transiency, uncertainty and death. The Hebrew psalmists knew this all too well and their lament has echoed across centuries: "we are as dust... our lives are soon over, they come to an end like a sigh... who can live and never see death?"

Finally there is *sankhara dukkha*, the suffering associated with the fact that in our usual waking state we are ceaselessly bombarded by stimuli and never fully at rest. This source of dissatisfaction is said to be fully appreciable only by advanced meditators. The implication is that we are all subject to a form of subtle but pervasive and continuous distress, whose source and nature remain unrecognized unless we undertake a contemplative discipline to train and sensitize the mind. This explains the claim of Buddhism and other spiritual disciplines that the bliss of nirvana and other transempirical states (e.g., the *nirvikalpa samadhi* of vedanta, the abyss of gnosticism) lie in their freedom from sensory bombardment.

When we move from the varieties of unsatisfactoriness to their cause we find that transpersonal perspectives tend to focus on identity, alienation and motivation. At the core of the transpersonal movement one finds a consistent claim that we suffer from a case of mistaken identity.

We see ourselves as "skin encapsulated egos" to use Alan Watts somewhat imprecise but picturesque term. However, our true identity is said to be something far more profound: something specifically transpersonal, i.e., far more than our usual personality or ego. Thus we are said to be alienated from our true nature in a manner analogous, but not necessarily identical to, the alienation suggested by Schelling or Hegel.

Not surprisingly a number of spiritual traditions and transpersonal theorists have suggested that this self-alienation is central to understanding both suffering and motivation. For we are said to yearn to recover our true identity and this yearning is said to be an expression of the eros of Plato, the developmental drive to overcome alienation of Schelling and Hegel,

the pull of the upper chakras of yoga, and the metamotive of self-transcendence described by Abraham Maslow.

But because we do not recognize our true transpersonal nature, this motive goes unrecognized and unfostered. More than this, it may even be denied, distorted or pathologized as sublimation at best or pathological defensiveness at worst.

Consequently we hurl ourselves into what Ken Wilber (1980) calls the Atman project, a desperate search for substitute gratifications. This is the hopeless quest to find full and enduring satisfaction through the gratification and aggrandizement, rather than the outgrowth and transcendence, of our phase-specifically appropriate, but ultimately stunted and illusory self-sense. The Atman project is a hopeless one since ultimately we can never get enough of what we don't really want. Yet billions of lives and countless cultures are driven, and driven insane, by it, and the poisoned, polluted and plundered earth around us attests to its insatiable fury.

In summary, both disciplines have profound concern with, and analyses of, the limitations and unsatisfactoriness of existence. Existentialism seems to have provided an unusually deep account of meaninglessness and unsatisfactoriness and to have rediscovered two of the three components of the Buddha's first noble truth of the unsatisfactoriness of existence. Both disciplines regard alienation as central and see it—not as do Marxist and social critics as a product of particular cultures or economics—but as a core element of human existence. However existentialism and transpersonalism tend to differ in their views of human nature and the self and hence in their views of self-alienation.

The Limitations and Seduction of Conventionality and Conventional Slumber

Both disciplines recognize and criticize the limitations of conventional worldviews and life styles. The existential emphasis is on a critique of nonreflective submersion in mass existence and conventional living: "the public" of Kierkegaard, "the herd" of Nietzsche, "the mass existence" of Jaspers, "the masses" of Ortega and "the they" of Heidegger.

The result is that the usual way of living is regarded as defensive and superficial, a condition which Eric Fromm referred to as "automation conformity" and Heidegger called "everydayness." Everydayness refers to the tendency to look at things superficially, to accept conventional views and conceal the truth about ourselves and the world from ourselves. When this drive to conceal becomes prepotent then everydayness exacerbates into full blown inauthenticity (Zimmerman, 1986).

Transpersonal perspectives agree entirely with this sober assessment of conventional lifestyles and societies. However they tend to frame this situation in terms of states of consciousness and development.

The usual condition is seen as a conventional slumber in which development has proceeded from the preconventional to conventional but has there ground to a halt in what Maslow (1971) called the "psychopathology of the average." Developmentally this conventional condition is regarded as a form of collective developmental arrest, with its own stage-specific and stage-limited characteristics such as a conventional worldview, social structure, self-sense, morality and mores (Wilber, 1980, 1995; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a).

While the conventional condition or stage represents a significant advance over preconventional magic thinking it still falls far short of our transconventional, transpersonal capacities. The conventional condition and its limitations have therefore been labelled in many ways. In the East it has been referred to as maya, a dream, or an illusion (Radhakrishnan, 1929). In the West it has been called a consensus trance, a collective psychosis, a conventional slumber, a shared hypnosis, or a form of unconsciousness (Tart, 1986; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a). However, we do not usually recognize this trance because it is self-masking, we have been hypnotized since infancy, we actively defend it, we all share in it, and because we live in the biggest cult of all: culture.

The Seduction of Conventionality

Both existentialists and transpersonalists agree that the power of the conventional majority is awesome. This power can be brutally obvious and coercive as in legal, military and penal institutions. Yet it's capacity to control thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, desires and dislikes is no less powerful but is more insidious and seductive. For the majority of people the conventional worldview compels, not merely by coercion, but by seduction and it is this seductive attraction which has been most intriguing and distressing to existentialists and transpersonalists alike.

Existentialists describe this attraction as a power or force that the conventional world exerts. For Kierkegaard it was "the power of the public"; for Nietzsche "the tyranny of the herd"; for Heidegger a "dominion" that produces a "levelling down."

Since this seduction by the conventional is so effective there must be something in individuals that is strongly attracted. Obviously this attraction can be analyzed at many levels; for example, in terms of security needs or social-belongingness needs. However, not surprisingly existentialists focus on existential dynamics as the forces that pressure individuals to succumb to conventional slumber. Heidegger in particular spoke of "falling," which is the almost inescapable tendency to hide from the truth about ourselves and the world. And what is this fearful truth that we go to such lengths to avoid? It is the essential ungroundedness of existence and the angst that this generates.

Transpersonalists are in general agreement with this existential view but again tend to add a developmental perspective, in this case coupled with the concept of "coercion to the biosocial mean." This type of coercion was identified in personality research with the finding that people with a strong genetic tendency to deviation from the social mean—such as extreme shyness or assertiveness—tend to be pushed by societal shaping toward the mean. Transpersonalists have suggested that a similar dynamic can occur developmentally, such that the average social level of psychological development functions like a magnet, pulling individuals up toward this level but retarding growth beyond it (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993; Wilber, 1995, 1996).

Like developmental theorists in several other areas (e.g., faith development, moral development) transpersonalists recognize three major developmental phases: prepersonal, personal and transpersonal, or preconventional, conventional and transconventional. Development up to conventional levels is expected and nurtured by society both informally and through formal educational institutions. On the other hand development beyond conventional levels is an individual matter that can be very demanding and threatening to both the individual and conventional society.

Development at any level is rarely all sweetness and light; difficulties attend all developmental stages. However there are extra difficulties in transconventional development and they come from both within and without the individual. In addition to the usual panoply of defenses that work to thwart growth at any stage, there appear to be additional barriers that swing into play at more advanced stages. These barriers, defenses, or metadefenses as we might call them, have long been recognized in spiritual traditions as, for example, the seduction of the siddhis (powers) of yoga or the pseudonirvana of Buddhism. More recently Desoille referred to the "repression of the sublime" and Maslow (1971) described "the Jonah complex": the fear of our potential and greatness. In addition, people

working at these levels must be willing to relinquish attachments to social approval and the consensual world view since this worldview must be overcome and social approval for doing so is far from likely.

Approval and applause are hardly likely to be forthcoming because transconventional development threatens conventionality and the consensus trance. The conventional worldview, illusion or maya, together with the values and lifestyles that both express and perpetuate it, are all called into question. From the perspective of Otto Rank or Ernest Becker (1973) this would be seen as a threat to conventional people's immortality projects. Not to share a belief system is to weaken it and since everyone identifies with their belief system, alternate systems are experienced as threatening to one's present way of being and one's future immortality. Herein lies a source of coercion to the biosocial mean and suppression of transpersonal development.

In summary, both existentialism and transpersonalism share a deep concern about the limitations and seductiveness of the usual or conventional worldview, state of consciousness, and lifestyle. Both see unreflective surrender to conventionality as a forfeiture of potential and authenticity, and transpersonal theorists tend to see this seduction and surrender in terms of development and states of consciousness.

Deficiencies of Our Usual Way of Living

Both disciplines acknowledge that our usual ways of living are deficient and that this deficiency includes a moral component.

For existentialists, it is not just that we escape the reality of our individual and human situation through succumbing to mass existence and becoming one of the herd, but that we deliberately deceive ourselves in and about the process. We not only freely choose to succumb but then obliterate our condition, our freedom and our choice from awareness.

Enormous amounts of time and energy—indeed, whole lifestyles and social collusions—must then go into maintaining our semiconsciousness. For Kierkegaard (1954, p. 174-175) this is a lifestyle of Philistinism (which) "tranquilizes itself in the trivial," resulting in a state of "shut-upness" and "half-obscurity." While the full panoply of defenses presumably play their hypnotizing part, it is the twin tranquilizers of habit and diversion that, according to Pascal, are particularly potent and that are great veils over our existence. "As long as they are securely in place, we need not consider what life means" (Barrett, 1958, p. 135).

The net result is inauthenticity or bad faith, the self-deceiving failure to live our lives open to both our common existential dilemma and our unique individual situation. The latter failing seems analogous to the trap for Indian yogis of failing to recognize their *swabhava* (unique character or nature) and follow their corresponding *svadharma* (unique personal path of practice) (Aurobindo, 1976).

Transpersonalists are in full agreement with this existential view but again add a perspective based on development and states of consciousness. Inauthenticity is seen as defensive clinging to conventionality when one could transcend it and along with bad faith and other forms of moral immaturity, can be viewed as expressing, stabilizing and reinforcing our usual distorted consensus trance. For example, unreflective busyness and habits can be seen as forms of "loading stabilization," a process in which a state of consciousness is stabilized and maintained by loading it with input and activity (Tart, 1983).

Strategies and Responses

Given all of the above—our moral immaturities, our deficient ways of living, the limitations and seductive power of conventionality, the unsatisfactoriness and groundlessness of existence—how are we to respond? Both disciplines agree in emphasizing the importance of detribalization and moral heroism, practices which may be essential elements for any significant degree of psychological maturity.

Detribalization is the process by which we escape from some of the distorting, constricted, erroneous beliefs of our cultural world view (Levinson, 1978). Through detribalization we are able to step back from these beliefs so that we no longer look through and identify with them; but rather begin to look at them, and in looking at them, disidentify from them, and in disidentifying from them are able to work to transform both them and ourselves.

For existentialists the central moral recommendation, in fact perhaps the central recommendation of all existentialism, is the adoption of an heroic attitude (Yalom, 1981). This attitude, together with its corresponding behavior, has variously been described as courage, engagement, resoluteness or authenticity. It involves an unflinching openness to the reality, ambiguities and suffering of life and is accomplished through a clearing away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars its own way" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 167).

These attitudes suggest a decidedly willful, actively heroic stance. Yet the mature Heidegger hinted at something beyond resoluteness, something less willful, more allowing, more Taoistic. This attitude or way of being he called "releasement" and described it as standing open to being (Zimmerman, 1986).

Of course significant parts of Heidegger's thinking seem to include decidedly mystical elements, as does that of Husserl, the founder of phenomenology (Caputo, 1978; Zimmerman, 1986). Fred Hanna (1993a, 1993b) has suggested that this is a natural consequence of profound phenomenological inquiry and that when this method is practiced rigorously and deeply it will naturally merge into a kind of contemplation and begin to yield mystical insights. Careful exploration of the relationship between phenomenology and contemplation/meditation could be very valuable and might open a methodological bridge between existential and transpersonal domains. Clearly one of the major deficiencies of Western—as opposed to Eastern—philosophy, religion and psychology has been the lack of a readily available, effective introspective/contemplative discipline.

Existentialists emphasize a kind of moral heroism, but it is a far cry from conventional ideas of morality, so much so that there has been debate over whether existentialism can offer any ethical guidelines or moral philosophy (Cooper, 1990). Consider, for example, Kierkegaard's arguments for "suspending the ethical" and Nietzsche's overman who was supposedly "beyond good and evil."

Yet the existential arguments make perfect sense from a developmental perspective. For the existentialists seem to be arguing for a transconventional morality which goes beyond or transcends conventional views of good and evil, as transconventional morality indeed does (Kohlberg, 1981). Such morality seems to be a means to, as well as an expression of, individual transconventional development.

However, it is very much an emphasis on *individual* transconventional development. While there is some discussion of reciprocal freedom which acknowledges that the quest for freedom and authentcity requires collaboration and "intersubjective solidarity" (Sartre) in which one "frees the other" (Heidegger), there is also Nietzsche's idea that "free spirits" need and "live off" the opposition of the herd (Cooper, 1990). Hence there is little discussion of the establishment of a transconventional community or *sangha*, or of transpersonal emotions and motives such as true love and compassion. This emphasis on the individual transcender beyond good or evil seems to be one reason why some existentialists have been susceptible to the charge of elitism.

A developmental transpersonal perspective therefore seems to throw new light on existential ethics. Transpersonalists agree with the necessity for a form of transconventional moral heroism and approve the Buddha's call for a stringent, communal ethical life "beyond good and beyond evil" (Byrom, 1976, p. 100). Such a view makes sense of the biblical injunction to "resist not evil" by suggesting that one's own malevolent impulses are best dealt with not by fighting them, but by opening to, experiencing, integrating and thereby transforming them. In contemporary developmental terms, the goal is maturation beyond conventional dualisms towards Kohlberg's (1981) highest stage seven in which morality is grounded in direct unitive experience in which "others" are experienced as part of one's Self and are so treated.

However, transpersonalists tend to see ethics as but one component of a multipronged discipline designed to foster development to transpersonal/transconventional stages and corresponding states of consciousness. Their language tends to include not only heroic metaphors but metaphors such as opening, unfolding, awakening, liberation and enlightenment (Metzner, 1986) and to acknowledge the importance of communal as well as individual development (Vaughan, 1995b; Wilber, 1995).

The preeminent developmental theorist within the transpersonal field has been Ken Wilber (1980, 1986, 1995, 1996). He has employed developmental structuralism to compare contemplative traditions across centuries and cultures and has identified six developmental stages beyond the conventional. The second of these transconventional stages he specifically identifies with the existential perspective and worldview and suggests that existential psychologists may have plumbed aspects of the human condition more deeply than almost all other Western schools. He then describes four further stages and corresponding perspectives beyond the existential. Not surprisingly these are increasingly difficult to attain and are rarely realized without the aid of some type of intensive contemplative discipline.

Cross cultural examination of authentic spiritual disciplines suggests that, while they may contain enormous amounts of peculiar cultural baggage, they may also contain common effective processes and practices. To date six common elements have been suggested, namely a foundation of ethics, attentional stabilization, emotional transformation, perceptual refinement, redirection of motivation, and the cultivation of wisdom (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a, 1993b). Almost invariably, authentic disciplines—that is, disciplines capable of effecting significant transpersonal development—include a contemplative or meditative training. This may seem at odds with Heidegger's (1982, p. 160) warning against "extravagant grubbing about in one's soul" but introspection can involve either obsessive rumination or disciplines of mental development and the two are light years apart (Vaughan, 1979).

These claims for the existence of transpersonal stages and potentials beyond the conventional are obviously of enormous significance. But the obvious question remains are they true"? Are transpersonal experiences, stages and capacities valid and valuable potentials within us all or are they, as has sometimes been suggested, the products of pathological, regressed or deluded minds engaged in desperate defensive maneuvers to avoid the harsh realities or mortality and meaninglessness? I do not wish to attempt to review the now very considerable body of theory and research on which these claims are made since such reviews are available elsewhere (e.g., Laughlin et al, 1992; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Walsh, 1993; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a; Wilber, 1977, 1980, 1995).

However in this arena, just as important as laboratory findings and elaborate theories, is direct experience. For thousands of years the great wisdom traditions have argued that the best way to test such claims is to test them oneself through exploring and cultivating one's own mind. Here existentialists and transpersonalists are in agreement: the most profound and important answers are to be found in one's own life and experience.

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