Conventional and authentic lives: Existential and transpersonal perspectives

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Existential and transpersonal disciplines have similar concerns and much to offer to each other. Both of them emphasise 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 how 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.

Here I will not summarise the existential and transpersonal movements nor provide the theoretical, phenomenological, contemplative and experimental data underpinning them. Rather, I will simply enunciate and compare their relevant 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, 1993; Wilber, 1981, 1995, 1996; and Yalom, 1981).

The unsatisfactoriness of our usual human condition

Both traditions recognise a bewildering ambiguity and unsatisfactoriness at the heart of everyday life. For Heidegger we are 'thrown' into a situation of ambiguity and alienation, which for Jaspers constitutes 'the shipwreck' of our human condition: homeless in an alien world. There we confront 'boundary situations' of aloneness, meaninglessness, responsibility and death (Yalom, 1981). 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. In fact, transpersonalists have much to learn from the sophisticated accounts that existentialists offer. The two schools differ, however, in their views of origins of this unsatisfactoriness.

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. This ego or self-sense is – just as existentialists have argued – neither given nor fixed but partly chosen and constructed, not substantial and essential but illusory and, for transpersonalists, transcendable. Thus

both existentialists and transpersonalists agree that our usual views of the self are erroneous and that careful systematic phenomenology or contemplation reveal these errors.

However the two schools differ in their understanding of the nature and necessity of the usual egoic self-sense and about the deeper nature of identity. Existentialists tend to assume that 'Every experience is 'owned,' in that it can and must be attributed to an 'I.' In Kant's terminology, each experience is accompanied by an 'I think'' (Cooper, 1990, pp.97–98).

Transpersonalists, however, hold a different view based on contemplative experiences. They regard the view that 'every experience is owned' as an example of what Buddhists call 'wrong view.' This is a common process in our usual state of consciousness in which imprecise awareness fails to recognise the ego constructive process and hence mistakenly assumes that there is some self to which experiences are occurring (Engler, 1993; Epstein, 1995).

With meditative training, however, awareness becomes more precise and sensitive, a classic claim now born out by experimental testing (Shapiro & Walsh, 1984). Then the ego constructive processes begin to be recognised and deconstructed, and the egoic, separate self-sense begins to dissolve (Goldstein, 1983). A rapid flux of images, thoughts and feelings is seen to underlie the assumption of a continuous ego (just as, through the process of flicker-fusion, a series of movie frames appears to create continuous images). This recognition was made famous in the West by David Hume who, when he looked for his self, could discover 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement...(Jones, 1969, p.305). Likewise in the East the Buddha proclaimed the doctrine of *anatta* or no-self (Collins, 1982.).

The deeper self-senses that are uncovered during meditative training and maturation are said to be increasingly transpersonal (i.e.,

extending beyond the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, psyche and cosmos). The identity that is eventually unveiled has been variously described as Self, Mind, Spirit, Geist, Atman, Tao, pure consciousness, *Sat-chit-ananda*, Buddha Nature, or True Nature. And this identity is said to be experienced as one with, or coessential with, the ground of existence. These claims of a realisable transpersonal identity which is united with the All are of course central to the perennial philosophy, that common core of wisdom at the contemplative heart of the great religions (Huxley, 1944). However, what is crucial to recognise is that these claims are not presented as tenets of faith or 'mere metaphysics.' Rather, they are reports of direct experiences that can, and should, be tested for oneself in meditation. The transpersonal movement has been described as a blending of perennial philosophy and contemporary knowledge and is deeply committed to the testing of these and other claims via all appropriate phenomenological, contemplative, intellectual and scientific means.

In light of these ideas about our usual egoic self-sense and our underlying transpersonal identity, both perennial philosophers and contemporary transpersonalists suggest that our usual condition is one of profound self-alienation (Wilber, 1995). Not surprisingly, transpersonal theorists suggest that this self-alienation is central to understanding our condition and suffering, and that growth and awakening to our deeper identity can relieve us of much of our angst, alienation, and what Wilber calls our 'Atman project'.

The Atman Project

Much of our individual and collective self-inflicted suffering – above and beyond our existential angst – can also be understood in terms of our mistaken identity and the unfortunate motives it spawns (Walsh, 1999; Wilber, 1980). 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 and Ken Wilber (1995).

But when we do not know of our transpersonal nature, the motive to uncover it goes unrecognised and unfostered. This motive may then be denied, distorted, or pathologized. Consequently we hurl ourselves into a desperate search for substitute gratifications: a search that Ken Wilber (1980) calls the Atman project. This is the hopeless quest to find full and enduring satisfaction through the gratification and aggrandisement, 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. Growth and awakening to our deeper identity can relieve us of much of our angst, alienation, and Atman project, though, of course, bottomless mystery remains.

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. Both disciplines regard alienation as central and see it – not as do social critics and Marxists as simply a product of 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 and, as we will see, of possible and appropriate responses.

The limitations and seduction of conventionality and conventional slumber

Both disciplines recognise and criticise the limitations of conventional worldviews and life styles. The existential emphasis is on a critique of unreflective 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 to 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, and solutions to it, 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, 1993).

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, 1993). However, we do not usually recognise this trance because it is self-masking, we have been hypnotised since infancy, we actively defend it, we all share in it, and because of it we live in the biggest cult of all, namely cult-ure.

The seduction of conventionality
Both existentialists and transpersonalists agree that the power of the conventional majority to control beliefs, attitudes and desires is awesome. This power can be brutally obvious and coercive as in legal, military and penal institutions. However, usually this power is more insidious and seductive. For most people the conventional worldview compels, not merely by coercion, but by seduction and it is this seductive attraction that 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 'leveling 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 analysed 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 our existence, values and choices 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).

Like developmental theorists in several other areas (e.g., faith development, moral development) transpersonalists recognise 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 threatening to both the individual and conventional society.

Development at any level is rarely all sweetness and light; difficulties attend all 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 world view must be overcome and social approval for doing so is far from likely.

Approval and applause are hardly likely because transconventional development threatens conventionality and the consensus trance. The conventional world view, illusion or maya, together with the values and lifestyles that both express and perpetuate it, are called into question. From the perspective of Otto Rank or Ernest Becker (1973) this can 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 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 developmental terms.

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 – then go into maintaining our semiconsciousness. For Kierkegaard (1954, pp.174–75) this is a lifestyle of 'Philistinism (which) tranquilises itself in the trivial,' resulting in a state of 'shut-upness' and 'half-obscurity.' While the full panoply of defenses presumably play their hypnotising part, it is the twin tranquilisers of habit and diversion that, according to Pascal, are ·particularly potent and that 'are great veils ȯver 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. This is in part the self-deceiving, unacknowledged choice to see ourselves as choiceless victims, who fail 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 recognise their *svabhava* (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. Along with bad faith and other forms of moral immaturity, it can be viewed as expressing, stabilising and reinforcing our usual distorted consensus trance. For example, unreflective busyness and habits can be seen as forms of 'loading stabilisation,' a process in which a state of consciousness is stabilised 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 emphasis-

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ing the importance of detribalisation and moral heroism, practices that may be essential for any significant degree of psychological maturity.

Detribalisation is the process by which we escape from some of the distorting, constricted, erroneous beliefs of our cultural world view (Levinson, 1978). Through detribalisation we are able to step back from these beliefs so that we no longer look through and identify with them. Rather, we begin to look at them, and in looking at them, disidentify from them. In disidentifying from them we 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 behaviour, has variously been described as courage, engagement, resoluteness or authenticity. It involves an unflinching openness to the reality, ambiguities and difficulties 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, 1962, p.167).

These attitudes suggest a decidedly willful, actively heroic stance. Yet the mature Heiddeger 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 & b) has suggested that this is a natural consequence of profound phenomenological inquiry and that when this method is practised 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.

While existentialists emphasise a kind of moral heroism, 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 primarily an emphasis on *individual* transconventional development. There is some discussion of reciprocal freedom which acknowledges that the quest for freedom and authenticity requires collaboration and 'intersubjective solidarity' (Satre) in which one 'frees the other' (Heidegger). However, 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 encompassing 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 charges of elitism.

A developmental transpersonal perspective, therefore, seems to throw new light on existential ethics (Walsh, 1999). 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). 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, 1998; Walsh, 1999) and to acknowledge the importance of communal as well as individual development (Vaughan, 1995b; Wilber, 1995, 1996).

The pre-eminent developmental theorist within the transpersonal field has been Ken Wilber (1980, 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 realised 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 seven common elements have been suggested, namely ethical behavior, attentional stabilisation, emotional transformation, perceptual refinement, redirection of motivation, cultivation of wisdom, and service (Walsh, 1999). Almost invariably, authentic disciplines – that is, disciplines capable of effecting significant transpersonal development – include 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.

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 critics – including some existentialists – have suggested, merely the products of pathological, regressed or deluded minds, engaged in desperate defensive maneuvers to avoid the harsh realities of mortality and meaninglessness? A considerable body of theory and research now supports some claims for the value and validity of transpersonal experiences and potentials (e.g., Laughlin et al., 1992; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Walsh, 1993; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993; Wilber, 1980, 1995, 1996)

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 assess 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.

Comments and comparisons

Kirk Schneider (1996) has provided thoughtful comments on some of the ideas expressed in this paper. While there are a few of his points I find questionable (but cannot analyse here because of space limits), for the most part I am in wholehearted agreement.

Schneider's central theme is a cry for humility: intellectual and existential humility and awe in the face of the unfathomable infinity and mystery of the universe. Who could not agree?

Schneider also wisely warns against claims for ultimacy. While I'm not sure that one can say that ultimate claims should never be made – that would itself be an ultimate claim – Schneider's warning is well taken. Existentialists have probably done better here than transpersonalists.

Schneider rightly points out the danger of members of one school claiming to fully comprehend another school. In my experience many examples of internecine psychological warfare actually reflect attacks on *misunderstandings* of other schools. All of us will benefit from deeper study of other perspectives and from becoming skilled in their epistemological methods.

Many of the differences between the world views of existentialists and transpersonalists reflect the divergent effects of their different epistemological methods. For existentialists the central methods are probably philosophical and psychological reflection (what St. Bonaventure and more recently Ken Wilber have called the 'eye of reason'). While transpersonalists employ the eye of reason they also rely on insights provided by meditative and contemplative practices: the 'eye of contemplation' (Wilber, 1990). These different epistemologies may underlie many of the existential-transpersonal intellectual differences, since world views reflect epistemologies.

Existentialists and transpersonalists may, therefore, both benefit from a fuller practice of both epistemological methods. The result may be a more comprehensive, more adequate, and more satisfying understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe, and a greater convergence between the two schools.

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