

## ***BOOK REVIEW***

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FERRER, JORGE N. (2017). *Participation and the mystery: Transpersonal essays in psychology, education, and religion*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 386 pages. ISBN10: N/A ISBN13: 978-1-4384-6487-9. Hardcover. \$95.00. *Reviewed by Elizabeth M. Teklinski.*

Transpersonal theorist Jorge N. Ferrer has spent much of his career exploring the implications of a participatory world view to questions central to transpersonal

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continue on next page...

psychology, integral education, and religious studies (e.g., comparative mysticism, religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue; see Ferrer, 2002, 2008; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005). Ferrer's (2017) newest book, *Participation and the Mystery: Transpersonal Essays in Psychology, Education, and Religion*, invites scholars and practitioners alike from various disciplines to lend their ears and voices to thrust participatory thinking into the farther reaches of human inquiry—charting, in this reviewer's assessment, an even more stunning turn for transpersonal psychology and related fields than the one arguably catalyzed by his seminal *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (Ferrer, 2002).

Ferrer's (2017) most significant contributions may be appreciated in terms of the following overlapping topics: (a) development of the participatory approach in transpersonal studies; (b) transpersonal psychology's relationship to science and so-called supernatural claims; (c) the ontological import of shared entheogenic experiences; (d) past, present, and potential future of embodied spirituality; (e) problematic consequences of favoring growth of mind and heart over the physical and instinctive aspects of human nature; (f) the cocreative potential of all human dimensions for spiritual growth and integral education; (g) development of participatory pedagogics that engage multiple epistemic faculties (such as a radical approach to contemplative education he calls Embodied Spiritual Inquiry); (h) impact of participatory thinking on the modern study of mysticism, spirituality, and religious studies; (i) critical engagement of the work of several distinguished transpersonal theorists, such as Stanislav Grof, Ken Wilber, and A. H. Almaas; and (j) intimations of the future of religious pluralism and world religion.

The book's chapters are organized in three parts. Part One focuses on transpersonal psychology, with chapters introducing the participatory approach and its impact on transpersonal theory (chapter 1), the relation between transpersonal psychology and science (chapter 2), the nature of a fully embodied spirituality (chapter 3), and the features of a genuinely integral spiritual practice (chapter 4). Exploring opportunities and proposed *solutions* to some of the imperative challenges now facing integral and contemplative education, Part Two includes a general participatory framework for integral learning (chapter 5), a discussion of the teaching of mysticism in higher education from a participatory perspective (chapter 6), and an introduction to Embodied Spiritual Inquiry as a second-person approach to contemplative education (chapter 7). In Part Three, Ferrer turns to contemporary spirituality and religious studies, with chapters on the import of Grof's research for the modern study of mysticism (chapter 8); a critical discussion of enlightenment, meditation, and spiritual practice in the context of Wilber's integral theory (chapter 9); and a participatory appreciation of religious diversity and utopian speculation about the future of religion (chapter 10). In closing, the book includes a Postscript summing up the book's major conceptual innovations, a Coda with a poem by Ferrer's father evoking human participation in the natural world, and two appendices discussing A. H. Almaas' (2014) new Diamond Approach and Steve Taylor's (2017) "soft perennialism," respectively. Precluded by limitations of space, *the remainder of this review will highlight two related conceptual threads*

*underlying Ferrer's overall work*: the overcoming of dualistic metaphysics and the affirmation of a multidimensional cosmos.

### **Beyond Neo-Kantian Dualistic Metaphysics**

To state it somewhat dramatically, Ferrer's (2017) *Participation and the Mystery* could play a significant role in informing major *paradigm changes to come through the* "merging of pragmatic science and spiritual concerns" (Lahood, 2007, as cited in Ferrer, 2017, p. 23). Iverson (2008) recalled that the "modernistic world of positivistic science was constructed on certainties, facts, and hierarchies of truth about the material world that extended to the social world and the individual subject's place within it" (p. 119). Idealists such as Kant came to assume that Cartesian space-time must then necessarily serve as a "precondition for conscious experience" (Weiss, 2004, p. 59). More specifically, Kant, Spencer, and other agnostics tried to know human consciousness "in the same way as they know objects. All the objects must conform to the categories of space, time, etc. in order to be known as objects" (Mísra, 1998, p. 139). Thus formulated, the ensuing Cartesian-Kantian paradigm has come to strongly privilege the laws of matter in terms of governing the evolutionary processes of the mind as well (Broughton & Zahaykevich, 1988).

Employing terminology such as the *noumenal* or the *transcendent*, many classical and contemporary theories in both transpersonal theory and religious studies have apparently used lenses biased toward dualistic metaphysics carrying forward the preconceptions of philosophers such as Kant (see Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013). As far as the neo-Kantian lens and its capacity to synthesize to any significant degree, Mísra (1998) maintained that such theories mostly disappoint in this regard:

Kant ultimately fails to give us a view of reason, which bridges the yawning gulf between the subject and object. Thought in Kant is still very much analytic. It has ultimately failed to attain concreteness and the true power of synthesis on account of its utter dependence upon sensibility. It is confronted on all sides by irreconcilable contradictions. It finds itself unable to solve the contradiction between subject and object, reason and sensibility, phenomena and noumena. (pp. 42–43)

*In this context, Ferrer's (2017) work is of utmost academic and psychospiritual importance, as it builds a synthesizing bridge toward uniting the naturalistic and supernaturalistic shores separated perhaps by a nearly four-centuries-old Cartesian-Kantian divide. As Ferrer (2017) put it, the gulf of the "Kantian mentalist dualism of a merely phenomenal world and an always inaccessible noumenal reality" (p. 54) might be best overcome by a participatory approach that embraces "a more liberal or open naturalism—one that is receptive to both the ontological integrity of spiritual referents and the plausibility of subtle worlds or dimensions of reality" (p. 69). In addition to overcoming the metaphysical naturalism (and Western colonialism) of contemporary proposals for a scientific transpersonal psychology (e.g., Friedman, 2002, 2013), this move, Ferrer continued, allows transpersonal*

psychologists to launch research programs into subtle realms, such as co-operative inquiries developed in partnership with native healers or practitioners that might include the intake of visionary medicines. As Ferrer elaborated in the book's Postscript, both open naturalism and the notion of a multidimensional cosmos also dismantles the traditional transcendent-immanent dichotomy and its attendant metaphysical implications.

### **A Deep and Ample Multidimensional Cosmos**

In this reviewer's opinion, Ferrer's (2017) latest work represents the first of its kind to explore the uncharted waters of a "deep and ample multidimensional cosmos" (p. 211), one where consciousness is not confined either to the brain or the material or natural world. Through my own exhaustive examination of both contemporary psychological theories and the history of scientific theorizing (Teklinski, 2016), it has become abundantly evident that the postulation of a multiverse, or a multidimensional cosmos—no less, any mention of associated nonphysical entities (see Rachel, 2013)—is considered taboo in both mainstream and even transpersonal circles (e.g., Daniels, 2005). To this point, Talbot (1992) elucidated, "It is currently not fashionable in science to consider seriously any phenomenon that seems to support the idea of a spiritual reality" (p. 244). Countless examples of this bias could easily be cited.

Due to its apparently unpopular status, the study of nonphysical realities and entities have "lagged behind the study of non-dual teachings as an academic discipline, and there is an apparent prejudice in both academic and popular circles . . . in favor of the more secular, non-dual schools of thought, such as Buddhism" (Julich, 2013, p. 26). Julich summed up the distinction as follows:

Buddhism and other contemporary non-dual teachings lend themselves easily to the secular and academic discourse, while the more occult practices of such systems as *Tantra* are fraught with accusations of charlatanism and deemed inferior . . . It is perhaps telling of this prejudice that there is a dearth of departments of occult studies in universities, and by the almost complete absence of Western occultism in popular non-duality-based models such as Wilber's. (pp. 26–27)

In the contemporary scholarly debate, just why the academic community refuses to consider such subtle dimensions of being is itself an interesting question. Indeed, for the most part, the academic establishment has ignored the findings of researchers concerning such topics of near-death experience, reincarnation, out-of-body experience along with the vast empirical body of evidence that compels such research (see Teklinski, 2016). As Kroth (2010) put it,

The politically correct and rigidly-policed bias of academic psychology—that any subjective reports of individuals actually leaving their bodies at these moments should either be ignored, dismissed, explained away, or remain

censored/unpublished in peer-reviewed journals—is a point of view that an open-minded, rational person should look at with extreme skepticism. (p. 798)

Due to apparent anthropocentric predispositions, as well as neo-Kantianism and its associated metaphysical agnosticism, Ferrer (2017) has noted among other possibilities, “[scholars overlook] the possible existence of subtle worlds or dimensions of reality coexisting with the physical realm that potentially house indwelling nonphysical entities” (p. 211). He continued:

As anyone who has engaged systematically in entheogenic inquiry knows, for example, subtle worlds and ostensibly autonomous spiritual entities can be encountered not only within one’s inner visionary landscapes (e.g., Strassman, 2001), but also in front of one’s open eyes in the world “out there” (Shanon, 2002)—and these external visions can sometimes be intersubjectively corroborated. (p. 211)

Most importantly, perhaps due to my professional background in hospice work, I can appreciate the striking implications that Ferrer’s (2017) multidimensional approach has for a plurality of meanings and possibilities surrounding the near-death/after-death experience. In alignment with his participatory account of a multiplicity of spiritual worlds and ultimates, Ferrer intimates, against mainstream thinking on this matter, that postmortem existence can be equally *plural*. With this, he supports Barnard’s (2007, 2011) contention (inspired in turn by Ferrer’s earlier works) that there is no reason to disregard the possibility of diverse cocreated, objective-subjective after-death scenarios. While Ferrer’s treatment of postmortem existence is admittedly preliminary and speculative, his account of multidimensional reality has clear relevance for new directions in scientific, philosophical, and psychological thinking on the topic.

### A Critique and Overall Recommendation

Although Ferrer’s work has had a tremendous impact on the trajectory of my own life and work, here I briefly note some factors that might possibly limit the more popular appeal and larger influence of his new book. In short, *Participation and the Mystery* is not an easy read. More precisely, Ferrer’s dense academic writing style—which seems to *play so effortlessly* in a *wide pitch range* and synthesis of so many complex subjects and rich ideas—appears to place too heavy an intellectual burden on some of his readers, including many of my past transpersonal professors. In fact, it is revealing that many of his would-be critics (e.g., Abramson, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Goddard, 2005, 2009; Wilber, 2002) do not appear to fully understand Ferrer’s participatory vision sufficiently to ground a compelling criticism, as I have yet to encounter one.

While *Participation and the Mystery* offers up more questions and possible new directions for participatory thinking than final answers, Ferrer’s new book is no doubt a critically important read for all students engaged in transpersonal and integral learning and research. It is well worth the effort for readers, particularly Ferrer’s final Postscript, where he sums up the most important conceptual changes

in his work since the publication of *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (Ferrer, 2002). Overall, Ferrer's *Participation and the Mystery* represents, dare I say, an epoch-making resource to introduce/re-introduce his pioneering participatory vision for all those who wish to deepen their understanding of the diversity of metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological implications of his work. As Ferrer (2017) celebrated, "a participatory sensibility to spirituality and scholarship can and does manifest in a rich multiplicity of ways" (p. 1).

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### The Reviewer

*Elizabeth M. Teklinski*, Ph.D., holds a BA in education with a major in English and minor in psychology from the University of Michigan; a MA in counselor education from Western Michigan University; and a PhD in East-West Psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). Teklinski was the first PhD candidate to transfer from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP)/Sofia University to CIIS. Her doctoral dissertation, titled *A Matter of Heart and Soul:*

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