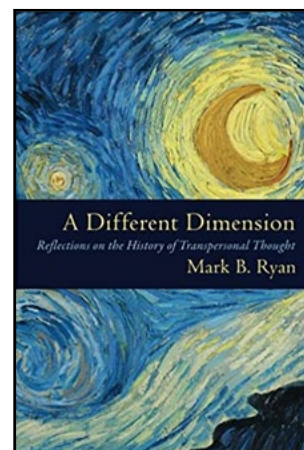


Reflections on, But Not a History of, Transpersonal Psychology¹

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A Review of *A Different Dimension: Reflections on the History of Transpersonal Thought*, by Mark B. Ryan. Westphalia, 2018, Pp. xvii + 231. \$22.50. ISBN 978-1-63391-757-6



This is not the book that I hoped to review, as I have long wanted to see a rigorous and scholarly work on the historical roots of transpersonal thought and their implications for its future evolution. Instead this book is a compilation of well-written and entertaining stories that portray many of the key figures and events leading to the transpersonal movement, including some that are still influential. I should have read its title more carefully, as indeed it is a reflection on, but not a history of, transpersonal thought. As such, it lacks the depth of analysis that could expose the many schisms and dilemmas haunting that controversial area, as well as many of its unique strengths and virtues, which a good history would have provided.

What is most conspicuously missing in this book is sufficient coverage of the scientific aspects of transpersonal thought. For example, transpersonal psychology was conceived as a science by its founders, such as Abraham Maslow, but today it is often indistinguishable from New Age religions as it is practiced. Accordingly, science seems poorly received by the book's author in terms of its relevance to transpersonal thought, and science is mostly criticized for its materialistic reductionism and largely dismissed as being mere "scientism" when applied to this area. Unfortunately, this perspective, from my view as a scientist interested in transpersonal thought, marginalizes the serious contributions of so many influential and pioneering transpersonal scientists, such as Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert (aka Ram Das), and Ralph Metzner in transpersonal psychedelics, Ken Ring and Roger Walsh in the transpersonal mapping of consciousness states, Dan Goleman in meditation research, the Greens (Alyce and Elmer) in biofeedback, Stanley Krippner and Charles Tart in the overlap between the domains of transpersonal psychology and parapsychology, and many more areas. I think it can be fairly stated that transpersonal thought pioneered many large intellectual and social movements, such as the so-called "cognitive revolution" by being among the first academic areas to consider consciousness as a legitimate topic. The origins in transpersonal thought of these and many other scientific areas are rarely mentioned, congruent with how they are not addressed much in this book.

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There are other important trends in the history of transpersonal thought that received little notice in this book. For example, multiculturalism (see Glover & Friedman, 2015) is another large intellectual and social movement pioneered by transpersonal thinkers, which is now mainstream. Transpersonal approaches were one of the first respecting, rather than denigrating, non-Western cultures. Ignoring these and many other ways that the transpersonal movement has opened areas of flourishing scholarship and profound cultural change would be an omission in a book dealing with the history of transpersonal thought but, again, this is one on reflections on such a history. Similarly, the burgeoning research and many applications related to “mindfulness” provides a salient example of a specific area pioneered by transpersonal thinkers that has gained tremendous traction today in academia and more broadly.

This book also tends to portray the transpersonal movement as holding commonly shared values and worldviews. This is an over-simplification of the diversity of perspectives held under this broad, and not well defined, umbrella. For example, the transpersonal movement is often portrayed as aligned with the peace movement, but I like to remind those who confound a specific set of values with transpersonal thought in general about World War II kamikaze pilots who engaged in transpersonal meditation prior to their missions, which were clearly not peaceful. For an overview of the diversity within transpersonal psychology, as one area of transpersonal thought, see the volume I co-edited (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013/2015).

Regarding portraying science accurately, this book claims that transpersonal approaches largely reject scientific positivism, which belies that many transpersonal thinkers operate from within a naturalistic and materialistic worldview congruent with various types of positivism. My own transpersonal research is grounded in a post-positivism that is strongly agnostic to any supernaturalism, and rejects romantic anti-intellectualism (Friedman, 2018). This does not mean I reject the possibility of expanded ways to view naturalism and materialism, but my approach, and that of many scientifically oriented transpersonal thinkers, is not based on the 19th century scientific reductionism parodied in this book as being the current scientific norm.

Along with my concern about this book’s negative slant toward science within transpersonal thought, I lament its overall lack of critical analysis. Thoughtful consideration of the many controversies in the area, including about boundaries involving related areas such as positive psychology and the psychology of religion/spirituality, would have added so much more value to this book, at least from my vantage as a scientist interested in the history of transpersonal thought. As an example for readers of this journal, coverage of how transpersonal thought relates to parapsychology could have gone beyond sharing interesting stories to focused discussion of these important issues in an historical context, something I have been exploring lately (Friedman et al., 2018). Such compare-and-contrast approaches would have provided more context in which to situate the history of transpersonal thought, while part of a more meaningful analysis would have also extended some of the past’s implications toward the future, as the purpose of history is not just to recount what has been, but also to learn from this and point toward what may become. Instead of much future prognostication, this book ends with some concluding, and interesting, personal anecdotes from the author, leaving this reader on his own to speculate about transpersonal thoughts’ likely direction.

In summary, this book contains many interesting, and even some awe inspiring, stories that could

captivate those interested in such a read. It seems oriented primarily toward generating popular appeal, but this book does little to tackle many of the big questions that often can only be seen through the large lens of history, including by using historical reflection as a tool. Nevertheless, for those who want a brief introduction to one scholar's personal reflections on the history of transpersonal thought as conveyed in a brief and relatively easy to read, but selective in what it contains and ignores, package, there may be value in starting with this book. However, I await the book that provides deeper engagement on transpersonal thought's history in a more comprehensive way by offering insightful explanations as to why and how this area emerged and, more importantly, what relevance its past has for it making significant contributions going into the future.

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