

# Humanistic or Transpersonal? Homo Spiritualis and the Perennial Philosophy

— Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

*God became man so that man might become God.* — St. Irenaeus

*In man the Spirit becomes the ego in order that the ego may become pure Spirit.* — Frithjof Schuon

In the late 1950s a “third force” in modern psychology known as humanistic psychology was beginning to take shape. In 1958 the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* was founded and in 1961 the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) was formally launched. Humanistic psychology was defined in contrast to behaviorism, known as the “first force”, and psychoanalysis, known as the “second force”, in modern psychology. It was developed to offset the reductionism of the first two “forces”, which was not a simple undertaking given the predominant intellectual myopia of the times.

It is important to realize that at its origin humanistic psychology acknowledged the spiritual dimension as being the *Summum Bonum* of the human condition—“The spiritual life is then part of the human essence. It is a defining characteristic of human nature, without which human nature is not full human nature” (Maslow, 1972:325). Or, “The spiritual dimension cannot be ignored, for it is what makes us human” (Frankl, 1973:x).

However, from within this “third force” there emerged a growing dissatisfaction about the limitations of this outlook, which resulted in the

development of a “fourth force”, transpersonal psychology, whose purpose was to acknowledge the rightful place of the empirical ego as well as that which transcends it—the Self (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). The school was originally defined through its official organ the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* in 1969, and the Association for Transpersonal Psychology (ATP) in 1971. Anthony J. Sutich defined this “fourth force” in modern psychology in these terms:

*Transpersonal (or “fourth force”) Psychology is the title given to an emerging force in the psychology field by a group of psychologists and professional men and women from other fields who are interested in those ultimate human capacities and potentialities that have no systematic place in positivistic or behavioristic theory (“first force”), the experiencing Individual definition classical psychoanalytic theory (“second force”), or humanistic psychology (“third force”).* (Sutich, 1969:15–16)

Abraham H. Maslow, pioneer of both third and fourth “forces”, describes how humanistic psychology was a preparation for a more complete psychology:

*I should say also that I consider Humanistic, Third Force Psychology*

*to be transitional, a preparation for a still ‘higher’ Fourth Psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like.* (Maslow, 1968:iii–iv)

Frances Vaughan, former president of both the Association for Humanistic Psychology and the Association for Transpersonal Psychology, makes the following distinction between these two “forces” in modern psychology:

*Transpersonal psychology was differentiated from humanistic psychology, placing greater emphasis on the study of spiritual experiences, optimum psychological health and the full spectrum of human consciousness. . . . Humanistic psychology then became primarily identified with feeling-oriented therapies and the process of self-actualization.* (Vaughan, 1995:162)

Although the perennial philosophy has been underscored as one of the central theoretical tenets of transpersonal psychology, and arguably of humanistic psychology (Bendeck Sotillos, 2009), very few people have researched the integral psychology of the perennial philosophy that recognizes both what is human and what is spiritual,

emphasizing their implicit inter-connectedness while not misrepresenting “the decisive boundary” between them (Lings, 1991) in the understanding that, to use an expression of Meister Eckhart, they are “fused but not confused”.

We recall the following words of Frithjof Schuon, a preeminent expositor of the *philosophia perennis*, quoted by Ken Wilber (1977) in what is considered a landmark work in the field of transpersonal psychology: “There is no science of the soul [*psyche*] without a metaphysical basis to it and without spiritual remedies at its disposal” (Wilber, 1977:11, Schuon, 1984:14). Wilber continues to put forward the centrality of the perennial philosophy within this emerging “fourth force” in modern psychology: “One might say that the entire aim of this volume [*The Spectrum of Consciousness*] is simply to support and document this statement of Frithjof Schuon, a statement that the siddhas, sages and masters of everywhere and everywhen have eloquently embodied” (Wilber, 1977:11). Although “the perennial philosophy” was popularized via Aldous Huxley’s (1944)



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acclaimed book under the same title, very few know of the traditionalist or perennialist school of comparative religion including René Guénon (1886–1951), Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), and a more contemporary exponent,

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), who have ardently presented the *philosophia perennis* in its uncolored light:

*The term philosophia perennis, which has been current since the time of the Renaissance and of which neo-scholasticism made much use, signifies the totality of primordial and universal truths—and therefore of the metaphysical axioms—whose formulation does not belong to any particular system.*

(Schuon, 1991:21)

A challenging ambiguity prevails when it comes to the term *humanistic*. Humanistic psychology initially declared its intent to do away with the errors and reductionism of behaviorism and psychoanalysis that dehumanized humanity by attempting to construct a psychology centering itself on the human ideal (Sutich & Vich, 1969). The perennial philosophy, on the other hand, views the term *humanistic* as denoting another current of reductionism which is rooted, alongside behaviorism and psychoanalysis, in the modern deviation: “There is a word which rose to honour at the Renaissance and which summarized in advance the whole programme of modern civilization: this word is ‘humanism’” (Guénon, 1996:25). Since the “third force” in modern psychology endeavors to revive a more inclusive conception of the human person, it could be misleading to apply the perennial philosophy’s critique to humanistic psychology insofar as this psychology actually differs from the Humanism born with the Renaissance, which may be defined in the following terms: “‘humanism’ [is]. . . the

point of view that would like to reduce everything to the purely human level, which basically is one with the profane point of view itself” (Guénon, 2001:81); or “The humanistic perspective not only proposes the cult of man, but by that very fact also aims at perfecting man according to an ideal that does not transcend the human plane” (Schuon, 1990:10). Conversely, according to Abraham Maslow, “The goal of humanistic studies [or humanistic psychology] was defined as the perception and knowledge of the good, the beautiful, and the true” (Maslow, 1994:8). However, we can see how certain problems might arise from the following characterization of humanistic psychology, which could lead to what might be



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termed “humanistic narcissism”:

*One of the most revolutionary concepts to grow out of our [humanistic psychology’s] clinical experience is the growing recognition that the innermost core of man’s nature, the deepest layers of his personality, the base of his ‘animal nature,’ is positive in nature—is basically socialized, forward-moving, rational and realistic. . . . We do not need to ask who will socialize him, for one of his own deepest needs is for affiliation and communication with others. . . . He is realistically able to control himself, and he is incorrigibly socialized in his desires. There is no beast in man. There is only man in man. . . .*

(Rogers, 1961:90,105,194)

Examples could also be provided within the “fourth force” of modern psychology as it has been noted that

*even the so-called spiritual archetypes, described by the school of C.*

*G. Jung, to which, without knowing it, we are subject, although they may in certain respects distinguish us from the animals, do, by their automatic character, nevertheless recall the nature of the animal.*

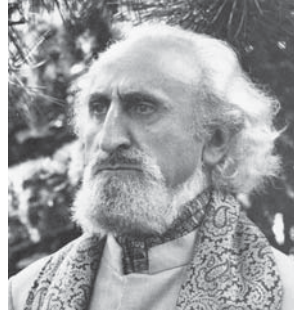
(Tournier, 1973:95)

By the same token, transpersonal psychology could be said to have divorced itself from what is human per se, which is conceived of as a “spiritual bypass” or “pre/trans fallacy” which could lead to spiritual narcissism. Be that as it may, even though we live in the *Kali-Yuga* which is marked by countless ingenious counterfeits, nevertheless the discernment (*viveka*) between the Real (*Ātmā*) and the illusory (*māyā*), the Absolute and the relative, remains situated in the spiritual domain itself. This is why it is crucial to demonstrate that the spiritual traditions and their corresponding psychologies are linked to a chain of transmission (*sikṣā*), both human and Divine, which alone can safeguard and integrate the human *psyche*. While the perennial philosophy does acknowledge the animal aspect of the human being, it in no way defines man by this criterion, since it would be sub-human to do so:

*It should be noted that human animality is situated beneath animality as such, for animals innocently follow their immanent law and thereby enjoy a certain natural and indirect contemplation of the Divine Prototype; whereas there is decadence, corruption and subversion when man voluntarily reduces himself to his animality.* (Schuon, 1981:69)

For this reason it is essential to demonstrate the hazards of defining the human person by what is strictly human, in the psycho-physical sense, instead of by what lies above the psycho-physical

sphere, namely the spiritual: “To say *homo sapiens*, is to say *homo religiosus*; there is no man without God” (Schuon, 1990:51), which also implies that “Man is fully man only when he realizes who he is [*in divinis*]” (Nasr, 1989:183), because “without a sense of the sacred you are less than a man” (Yellowtail in Fitzgerald, 1994:9). The human individual becomes what



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he or she is by transcending his or her animal nature: “Man is totally himself only by transcending himself” (Schuon, 1990:39)—a truth which is also expressed by Victor Frankl, a pioneer of both humanistic and transpersonal psychology: “Self-transcendence is the essence of [human] existence” (Frankl, 1988:50). Likewise Paul Tournier states that “Man is not just a body and a mind. He is a spiritual being. It is impossible to know him if one disregards his deepest reality” (Tournier, 1965:55). To ignore this danger of reducing the human being to the sub-human by ignoring the spiritual dimension would be to close one’s eyes to the many errors that have led the modern and post-modern world into its present-day dilemma:

*The word “humanism” constitutes a curious abuse of language in view of the fact that it expresses a notion that is contrary to the integrally human, hence to the human properly so-called: indeed, nothing is more fundamentally inhuman than the “purely human,” the illusion of constructing a perfect man starting from the individual and terrestrial; whereas the human in the ideal sense draws its reason for existence and its entire content from that which transcends the individual and the earthly.* (Schuon, 1982:9)

Rather than being a mere play of semantics, the above passage provides another example of how modern psychology (behaviorism, psychoanalysis, humanistic, and transpersonal) differs from the integral or traditional psychology of the perennial philosophy, since all modern psychology is an outgrowth of the scientism of the Enlightenment known as the Cartesian–Newtonian

outlook (Rank, 1998, Edwards, 1998, Ferrer, 2002, Grof, 1984, Tart, 2009) as opposed to traditional psychology which is rooted in a sacred science based upon metaphysical principles (Guénon, 2001, Nasr, 1993). Less discerning adherents of transpersonal or even humanistic psychology may perhaps argue otherwise, but since both are contingent upon and in many cases continuations of the first two “forces”—“It is a prolongation of rationalistic materialism, extending it to the whole of [modern] psychology” (Tournier, 1964)—this materialistic science is not easily overcome, nor is the problematic influence of New Age thought which made its appearance vis-à-vis the Human Potential Movement (Vitz, 2002, Drury, 1989, Hanegraaff, 1998) leading numerous seekers astray as these spiritual forms are not rooted in a genuine revealed tradition. This point would require further analysis which cannot be contained by this article (see Smith, 1982, Stoddart, 2008, Upton, 2001, Bendeck Sotillos, 2010).

The perennial philosophy’s view of humanity is clearly expressed by John Herlihy:

*According to all the great spiritual traditions of the world, the defining*



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*characteristic of the human species is the quality of human-ness, for want of a better term. Humanity is considered human because it enjoys a number of higher faculties that distinguish the species from the rest of the animal kingdom and place it at the pinnacle of the creation as a being created in the image of God [imago Dei].*

(Herlihy, 2005:149)

The following passage, however, expresses what happens when the human norm, rooted in the recognition of the Origin and Center of all things manifest and unmanifest—a recognition which appears in varying forms in both East and West—becomes subverted by one's terrestrial or "horizontal" identity:

*. . . a remarkable fact [is] that man, as he regarded himself as a creature, interpreted his existence in the image of God [imago Dei], his creator; but as soon as he started considering himself as a creator [the kingdom of*

*man], began to interpret his existence merely in the image of his own creation, the machine.*

(Frankl, 1988:16)

A defining point of "height psychology"—humanistic and transpersonal—as first envisioned by its pioneers is that the human individual is inseparably connected to, and accordingly fulfilled by, the spiritual domain. In the words of Frankl, "The 'spiritual' is what is human in man" (Frankl, 2000:28)—or, more simply: "Man is spirit" (Frankl, 1985:70). According to the perennial philosophy, the human state is consummated in the transpersonal; and yet, devoid of the transpersonal, the human state cannot be what it is meant to be. "To speak of a 'spiritual anthropology' is already a pleonasm—to say man is to say spirit—but it is justified in a world which, having forgotten the divine, no longer can know what is human" (Schuon, 1982:76).

Furthermore, "the sole way to the Transpersonal is through the Personal, . . . the only path beyond the human leads straight through the human" (Upton, 2008:34). The human individual is properly human only so long as that individual's animality is subsumed into the spiritual domain:

*What is human is what is natural to man, and what is most essentially or most specifically natural to*

*man is what relates to the Absolute and which consequently requires the transcending of what is earthly in man.* (Schuon, 1982:9)

The polarity between what is human and what is spiritual is not only harmonized but actually resolved by the plenary principles of the perennial philosophy. It is only through an alignment of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies with the tenets of the perennial philosophy that an integral psychology addressing the entirety of the human person—Spirit, soul and body—may be authentically effective. What has been presented here is only the outline of such an alignment, partial at best, yet it underscores what is indispensable to any operative psychology that means to address the human being *in toto*, which is to also say *in divinis*. We are quite aware that it is a nearly impossible task, or at least a daunting one, to compare the primordial tradition, unanimous in all times and places, with modern psychology. And although many questions, and important ones at that, remain unanswered, it is through the guiding light of the perennial philosophy that we may progressively achieve greater clarity on this matter, a viewpoint that reminds us of the immense danger of disowning spirituality, for it is only through the spiritual that man may know what it means to be fully human: "Without the transcendent and the transpersonal, we get sick, violent, and nihilistic, or else hopeless and apathetic" (Maslow, 1968:iv).

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