



Beyond the Brain

SUNY Series in Transpersonal and Humanistic
Psychology Richard D. Mann and Jeanne B. Mann, Editors

Beyond the Brain
Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy

Stanislav Grof

State University of New York Press

To Christina, Paul, and my mother Maria

Published by
State University of New York, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, address State University of New York
Press, State University Plaza, Albany, N.Y., 12246

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Grof, Stanislav, 1931-

Beyond the brain.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Transpersonal psychotherapy. 2. Consciousness.

3. Subconsciousness. 4. Psychiatry—Philosophy.

I. Title.

RC489.T75G76 1985 85-14882

ISBN 0-87395-953-1

ISBN 0-87395-899-3 (pbk.)

15 14

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Acknowledgments

This book is the product of an intensive and systematic search that has extended over a period of almost three decades. In all the stages of this long quest, the professional and personal dimensions were so intimately interwoven that they have merged into an inseparable amalgam. It has been a journey of personal transformation and self-discovery as much as a process of scientific exploration of uncharted territories of the human psyche.

Over the years, I have received inestimable help, encouragement, and inspiration from many people who have been important in my life, some as teachers, others as friends and fellow searchers, and a few in a combination of all these roles. It is impossible here to mention all of them by name. However, in several instances the contributions have been so outstanding that they deserve special notice.

Angeles Arrien, an anthropologist trained in the Basque mystical tradition, has been a true friend and a living example of how to integrate the feminine and masculine aspects of one's psyche and how to "walk the mystical path with practical feet."

Anne and Jim Armstrong have taught me much about the nature of a genuine psychic gift and about the evolutionary potential of transpersonal crises. Their excitement, enthusiasm, and courage in exploring the human psyche and the unknown provide a unique example of a shared adventure in consciousness.

Gregory Bateson, with whom I had the privilege to spend many hours of intense personal and intellectual interaction during the two and a half years before his death, when we both were scholars-in-residence at the Esalen Institute in California, was an important teacher and a special friend. His incisive critique of mechanistic thinking in science and his creative synthesis of cybernetics, information and systems theory, psychiatry, and anthropology have had a profound influence on my own development.

Joseph Campbell, brilliant thinker, master teacher, and a dear friend, has taught me invaluable lessons about the paramount relevance of mythology for psychiatry and our everyday life. His influence on my personal life has been equally profound.

Fritjof Capra's work has played a critical role in my own intellectual development and scientific quest. Reading his *Tao of Physics* gave me firm hope that the extraordinary observations from modern consciousness research could in the future be integrated into a new and comprehensive scientific world view. Our friendship over the years, and a rich exchange of information during the time he was writing *The Turning Point*, have been of great help for my work on the present book.

Michael and Sandra Harner, who belong to our most intimate circle of friends, have given me much support, encouragement, and opportunity for the sharing of unconventional observations and information. Michael, who combines the role of a respectable academician and an accomplished "white shaman," provides an important model and example for my own life.

Swami Muktananda Paramahansa, the late spiritual teacher and head of the Siddha Yoga lineage, with whom I have had much contact over the years, gave me the unique opportunity to observe and experience the powerful influence of a vital mystical tradition on human lives.

Ralph Metzner, who combines in a unique way solid scholarship, an inquisitive mind, and an adventurous spirit, has been an important friend and fellow searcher.

Rupert Sheldrake has been able to formulate with unusual clarity and incisiveness the limitations of mechanistic thinking in natural sciences that I have myself been aware of for many years. His work has helped me considerably to free myself from the straitjacket of the belief systems imposed on me by my professional training.

Anthony Sutich and Abraham Maslow, the two main initiators and founders of both humanistic and transpersonal psychology, were for me important sources of inspiration, giving a concrete form to some of my dreams and hopes concerning the future of psychology. It was an unforgettable experience to be with them at the cradle of the transpersonal movement.

Arthur Young's theory of process represents one of the most exciting concepts I have encountered during my intellectual life. My appreciation of it as a scientific metaparadigm of the future has been increasing rapidly as I become more intimately acquainted with it.

The discovery of the holonomic principles opened for me an entirely new world of possibilities for theoretical speculations and practical applications. My special thanks here belong to David Bohm, Karl Pribram, and Hugo Zucarelli.

My clinical work with psychedelics has played a critical role in instigating my lifelong interest in consciousness research and in generating the most important data discussed in this book. It would not have been possible without the epoch-making discoveries of Albert Hofmann. I would like to express here my deep gratitude for the profound influence that his work has had on my professional and personal life.

The stimulating atmosphere of the Esalen Institute and the natural beauty of the Big Sur coast have provided a unique setting for the work on this book. I would like to thank my Esalen friends, Dick and Chris Price, Michael and Dulce Murphy, and Rick and Heather Tarnas for their support over the years. In addition, Rick taught me much about the relationships between astronomical processes and the archetypal dynamics. Kathleen O'Shaughnessy deserves special thanks for her dedicated and sensitive help in the final typing of the manuscript.

My deepest thanks go to the immediate members of my family— my mother Maria, my brother Paul, and my wife Christina. They have carried the most immediate impact of the intellectual, psy-

chological, philosophical, and spiritual roller coaster of my unconventional quest over the years. Christina, in particular, has been my closest friend and fellow searcher for many years, sharing both my personal and professional life. We have jointly developed and practiced the technique of holotropic therapy described in this book. I have learned from her own dramatic personal journey many lessons that only life can provide. She has also been the main inspiration for the Spiritual Emergency Network that we jointly launched in Big Sur, California.

Introduction

The following pages represent an attempt to condense into a single volume data from almost thirty years of research on nonordinary states of consciousness induced by psychedelic drugs and a variety of nonpharmacological methods. It is a document reflecting my efforts to organize and integrate in a comprehensive way a large number of observations that have for many years daily challenged my scientific belief system, as well as my common sense. In response to this avalanche of disturbing data, I have many times adjusted and readjusted my conceptual frameworks and patched them up with various ad hoc hypotheses, only to face the need to change them again.

In view of the difficulties I myself have had over the years in accepting the evidence presented in this book, I do not expect my readers to find it easy to believe much of the information I put forward, unless they themselves have had corresponding experiences, personally and in work with others. I hope those who belong to this category will welcome this evidence as independent confirmation of many of the issues they themselves have been struggling with. It has been exciting and encouraging for me over the years

to come across reports of others, indicating that my quest was not as solitary as it has at times appeared.

As for readers who have not had such corresponding experiences, I am particularly interested in reaching those who are sufficiently open-minded to use the data I present as an incentive to conduct their own work aimed at confirming or refuting them. I do not expect anybody to accept the material in this book at face value; the technologies through which the experiences and observations discussed were obtained are described in sufficient detail to allow replication. The use of psychedelics, the most potent tool among these technologies, is, of course, associated these days with considerable political, legal, and administrative difficulty. However, the nondrug approaches described are readily available to anyone seriously interested in pursuing this avenue of research.

The data may also interest those researchers who have been studying the same or related phenomena in the context of other disciplines and with the use of other techniques and methodologies. Here belong, for example, anthropologists doing field research in aboriginal cultures and studying shamanic practices, rites of passage, and healing ceremonies; thanatologists exploring death and near-death experiences; therapists using various powerful experiential techniques of psychotherapy, body work, or nonauthoritative forms of hypnosis; scientists experimenting with laboratory mind-altering techniques, such as sensory isolation or overload, biofeedback techniques, holophonic sound or other sound technologies; psychiatrists working with patients experiencing acute nonordinary states of consciousness; parapsychologists researching extrasensory perception; and physicists interested in the nature of space and time and in the implications of quantum-relativistic physics for the understanding of the relationship between matter and consciousness.

My own difficulties in accepting these new observations without repeated, overwhelming evidence and, particularly, without firsthand personal experience, have shown me the futility of evaluating the data from consciousness research from the ivory tower of one's old belief systems. The history of science clearly demonstrates the short-sightedness of rejecting new observations and evidence just because they are incompatible with the existing world view or current scientific paradigm. The unwillingness of Galileo's contemporaries to look through his telescope, because they already knew

there could not possibly be craters on the moon, is a prime example of the limitations of such an approach.

I believe that many of the problems discussed in the following pages are of such basic importance and general interest that the book could be of use for many intelligent lay persons who are not involved specifically in research in any of the areas mentioned. The issues that should be particularly relevant for general audiences are the new image of reality and of human nature; a scientific world view incorporating the mystical dimensions of existence; an alternative understanding of emotional and psychosomatic problems, including some psychotic states; a new strategy for therapy and self-exploration; and insights into the current global crisis. This book, in manuscript form, has already been helpful for many individuals experiencing episodes of nonordinary states of consciousness, providing for them a new conceptual framework and a new strategy.

When, in the early days of my psychedelic research, I approached my friends and immediate colleagues to share the new exciting observations, I learned an important lesson. It became painfully obvious that an honest and uncensored presentation of what I have seen would meet deep disbelief and suspicion and would entail a serious risk of professional disqualification and ridicule. From then on, the task has not been to find the best way of articulating and communicating the new realities in their totality, but to decide from one situation to another how much it was possible and reasonable to report, what metaphors and language to use, and how to relate the reported facts to the existing body of knowledge accepted by the scientific community.

During my first ten years of psychedelic research in Czechoslovakia, I found only a handful of friends and colleagues who were sufficiently open-minded to accept the entire spectrum of the new findings and consider seriously their scientific and philosophical implications. Although, in 1967, when I was leaving Czechoslovakia, there were more than forty research projects on the use of psychedelics, many of those involved tried to limit their clinical work and conceptual frameworks to the biographical level; they were avoiding the new observations, or attempting to explain them in traditional ways.

When I began lecturing about my European research in the United States, the circle of my like-minded colleagues increased

rapidly. Among these new friends were not only psychedelic researchers, but anthropologists, parapsychologists, neurophysiologists, and thanatologists, who shared with me a determined conceptual struggle to integrate the results of unconventional personal and professional search and research with the philosophy of contemporary science. Many of them also had files of unpublished and unpublishable data and observations, articles, and even manuscripts that they did not dare to share with their Newtonian-Cartesian colleagues or with the public. After my many years of professional isolation, this was a very exciting and encouraging development.

In the late sixties, I made the acquaintance of a small group of professionals, including Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich, and James Fadiman, who shared my belief that the time was ripe for launching a new movement in psychology, focusing on the study of consciousness and recognizing the significance of the spiritual dimensions of the psyche. After several meetings aimed at clarification of these new concepts, we decided to call this new orientation "transpersonal psychology." This was soon followed by the launching of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* and the Association for Transpersonal Psychology.

Although it was very encouraging to find a sense of professional identity—a rapidly growing group of like-minded colleagues sharing the same understanding of psychology and psychiatry—this did not completely solve my old problem of identity as a scientist. In spite of the fact that transpersonal psychology had a certain inner cohesion and was to some extent comprehensive in itself, it was almost completely isolated from mainstream science. Like my own world view and belief system, it was vulnerable to accusations of being irrational and unscientific, meaning, incompatible with common sense and current scientific thinking.

This situation changed very rapidly during the first decade of the Association of Transpersonal Psychology. It became clear that the transpersonal orientation and perspective by far transcended the narrow confines of psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy. During this time, important links were made to revolutionary developments in other scientific disciplines—quantum-relativity physics, systems and information theory, study of dissipative structures, brain research, parapsychology, holography, and holonomic thinking. More recently this has been complemented by new formulations

in biology, embryology, genetics, and the study of behavior, and by the development of holophonic technology.

Many of the pioneers of these new ways of thinking in science participated over the years as guest faculty members during the four-week experimental educational programs that my wife Christina and I have been conducting at the Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, California. In this context, I have been able to spend formal and informal time in fascinating interactions with Frank Barr, Gregory Bateson, Joseph Campbell, Fritjof Capra, Duane Elgin, David Finkelstein, Elmer and Alyce Green, Michael Harner, Stanley Krippner, Rupert Sheldrake, Saul-Paul Sirag, Russel Targ, Charles Tart, Arthur Young, and many others. I have also had the opportunity for some intimate time and information exchange with pioneers in transpersonal psychology—Angeles Arrien, Arthur Hastings, Jack Kornfield, Ralph Metzner, John Perry, June Singer, Richard Tarnas, Frances Vaughan, Roger Walsh, and Ken Wilber.

The contacts and interactions with a wide spectrum of unique and creative individuals, made possible by our four-week seminars at the institute, were the major source of inspiration for the International Transpersonal Association (ITA), which I launched, in 1978, jointly with Michael Murphy and Richard Price, the founders of the Esalen Institute. The ITA differed from the Association for Transpersonal Psychology in its explicit international and interdisciplinary emphasis. During the early years, when I functioned as ITA's first president, I had the opportunity to organize large international transpersonal conferences in Boston, Melbourne, and Bombay. These annual meetings of the ITA have attracted groups of unique speakers and large open-minded audiences and have helped to crystallize the theoretical formulations and consolidate the transpersonal movement.

At present, the new thinking in science seems to be rapidly gaining momentum. Although the fascinating individual developments have not yet been integrated into a coherent and comprehensive scientific paradigm replacing the mechanistic model of the universe, new pieces are being added to this impressive jigsaw puzzle at an unprecedented rate. It is my personal belief that it is extremely important for the future of science and possibly of our planet that these new developments win the acceptance of the scientific community. For this reason, I have not presented this material in a simplified and popularized version, which would have

been the preference of many publishers with whom I negotiated. I felt a strong need to present the data from my consciousness research in the context of the revolutionary findings in the other disciplines mentioned above, which were so important for my own personal and professional development. The presentation of my own data is thus preceded by a chapter on the emerging paradigm, which summarizes the work of many other researchers and thinkers and sets the context for the rest of the book.

One of the deepest influences on my thinking was the discovery of holonomic principles, as exemplified by the work of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz, Jean Baptiste Fourier, Dennis Gabor, David Bohm, Karl Pribram, and Hugo Zucarelli. It was the recognition of the revolutionary alternatives to the mechanistic concept of the "mind contained in the brain," offered by holonomic thinking, that inspired the title of this book, *Beyond the Brain*.

Chapter One

The Nature of Reality: Dawning of a New Paradigm

In various sections of this book, important observations from diverse fields will be discussed—observations that cannot be accounted for and explained by mechanistic science and the traditional conceptual frameworks of psychiatry, psychology, anthropology, and medicine. Some of the new data are of such far-reaching significance that they indicate the need for a drastic revision of current understanding of human nature, and even the nature of reality. It seems, therefore, appropriate to start this book with an excursion into the philosophy of science by reviewing some modern ideas about the relationship between scientific theories and reality. Much of the resistance on the part of traditional scientists against the influx of new revolutionary data is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and function of scientific theories. In the last few decades, such philosophers and historians of science as Thomas Kuhn (1962), Philipp

Frank (1974), Karl Popper (1963; 1965), and Paul Feyerabend (1978) have brought much clarity into this area. The pioneering work of these thinkers deserves a brief review here.

Philosophy of Science and the Role of Paradigms

Since the Industrial Revolution, Western science has achieved astounding successes and has become a powerful force, shaping the lives of millions of people. Its materialistic and mechanistic orientations have all but replaced theology and philosophy as guiding principles of human existence and transformed to an unimaginable degree the world we live in. The technological triumphs have been so remarkable that, until quite recently, very few individuals questioned the absolute authority of science in determining the basic strategies of life. The textbooks of various disciplines tend to describe the history of science as a linear development with a gradual accumulation of knowledge about the universe that culminates in the present state of affairs. Important figures in the development of scientific thinking are thus presented as contributors who have worked on the same set of problems and according to the same set of fixed rules that the most recent achievements have established as scientific. Each period of the history of scientific ideas and methods is seen as a logical step in a gradual approximation to an increasingly accurate description of the universe and to the ultimate truth about existence.

Detailed analysis of the history and philosophy of science reveals that this is a grossly distorted and romanticized image of the actual course of events. One can make a very powerful and convincing argument that the history of science is far from linear and that, in spite of their technological successes, scientific disciplines do not necessarily bring us closer to an ever more accurate description of reality. The most prominent representative of this heretical point of view is the physicist and historian of science, Thomas Kuhn. His study of the development of scientific theories and revolutions in science was first inspired by his observation of certain fundamental differences between the social and natural sciences. He was