

## Participatory vision in Mysticism Jorge Ferrer's critique of essentialism and constructivism

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### **Introduction**

For a long time—especially in the late twentieth century—the two schools of perennialism (or essentialism) and constructivism (or contextualism) dominated the study of mysticism. The theorists of these schools sought to challenge one another, to undermine each other's foundations, to respond to their critiques, and to maintain the coherence of their own positions. In the midst of this debate, a group of scholars argued that it is not possible to construct a stable framework on the foundations of either school and therefore attempted to propose a new approach based on different premises. Jorge Ferrer, who is considered a leading transpersonal psychologist, belongs to this group. By criticizing both essentialist and constructivist approaches, he has sought—through the foundations of participatory perspective—to resolve the differences between the two and to offer a new interpretation within these studies.

This article addresses the questions of the grounds on which Jorge Ferrer critiques these two approaches and the philosophical and psychological foundations on which he explains mystical experience.

### **Research findings**

According to Ferrer, essentialism requires assumptions and leads to particular conclusions, one of which is objectivism. Essentialists generally assume that there is a pre-given spiritual ultimate that can be objectively known by mystics of all traditions. A serious drawback shared by all these approaches, however, is that they import to spiritual realities the notorious Myth of the Given.

Constructivists maintain that spiritual knowledge is always mediated and molded by frameworks such as cultural factors, doctrinal commitments, and soteriological expectations. And they operate under the Myth of the Framework. It appears that their metaphysical basis rests on neo-Kantian presuppositions.

Participatory thought understands the world as a dynamic and open-ended living system that is continually involved in co-creating itself. And the human mind is an organ of the world's own process of self-revelation. The essential reality of nature is not separate, self-contained, and complete in itself, so that the human mind can examine it objectively; rather, nature's unfolding truth emerges only through the active participation of the human mind. In participatory thought, mind and nature are necessarily woven from the same fabric, and the mind is made of the same stuff. Spiritual and mystical experiences are not events that merely happen to an individual; rather, they are actions that the world and the self (the individual) bring forth together—a process that Ferrer calls participatory enaction. Within the participatory view, the relationship between the divine and the human is reciprocal and interconnected. The ego is not an observer who can take in the whole painting from afar; rather, it is part of the canvas and situated upon it. Although the ego can expand its location through experience and dialogue, it cannot escape its situatedness; this situatedness is the very essence of its belonging, and at the same time the source of both its vitality and its limitation.

### **Conclusion**

According to Ferrer, both essentialism and constructivism are parasitic of the experiential vision of spiritual phenomena. On the one hand, the appeal to an uninterpreted mystical experience is pivotal and fundamental for essentialists in order to defend the universality of human spirituality. On the other hand, constructivist analyses are primarily focused on how mystical experiences are shaped, constructed, and expressed. Both essentialists and constructivists are deeply dependent on the dualism of Framework and Reality. Essentialists insist on one pole of the dualism, embracing the idea of uninterpreted reality and thereby falling into the problems associated with the Myth of the Given. Constructivists insist on the other pole, becoming trapped in conceptual frameworks and sliding into the Myth of the Framework.

From Ferrer's perspective, we need a model that integrates the partial truths of essentialism and constructivism into a participatory vision of spirituality. On the basis of the philosophical foundations of the participatory thought, as well as the findings of transpersonal psychologists such as Stanislav Grof and Carl Jung, Ferrer seeks to propose a new explanation.

In the participatory vision, the human mind is not wholly separate from the material world; rather, the mind and nature are woven and interconnected in a dynamic interaction, such that the truth of the world is disclosed through the participation of the human mind. Spirituality emerges through the interaction between the human mind and the world, and the two mutually affect one another, shaping each other in a process of transformative participation. In this context, Ferrer employs the term and metaphor of the "Ocean of Emancipation". He agrees with essentialists that there is a single spiritual ultimate, namely the Ocean of

Emancipation; however, the Ocean of Emancipation does not correspond to a single spiritual referent, but to the overcoming of self-centeredness. On the other hand, in agreement with constructivists, Ferrer accepts that different spiritual traditions lead to different ultimates, and although they may share some qualities, they are independent of one another. It could be said, then, that The Ocean of Emancipation has many different shores. And different traditions—by virtue of their differences—are situated on distinct shores of this ocean. Rather than understanding various spiritual ultimates as different levels, dimensions, or interpretations of a pre-given spiritual reality, they can be seen as enactments of a dynamic and unknown spiritual power.

**Keywords:** Essentialism, Constructivism, Jorge N. Ferrer, Participatory vision, The ocean of emancipation.