

‘Transcendence and the transliminal’

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The human faculty to step beyond the boundedness of the individual self into a place of connection has long been recognized by religious traditions and spiritual practitioners. The concept of the ‘transliminal’ (Thalbourne et al. 1997) has been introduced into the discourse by Claridge in research into schizotypy – or openness to unusual experiencing (Claridge 1997). This paper attempts to bridge the psychological/scientific and spiritual divide by combining the evidence of experience with a theory of cognitive architecture, in order to unpack the way in which the person operates both as a discrete individual and embedded in relationship. Relationship here is a broad concept, including relationship with the ultimate: that which is beyond human knowing; the transcendent. Thus, with respect for both science and mystery, the aim is to reach a richer understanding of a crucial but elusive aspect of human experiencing.

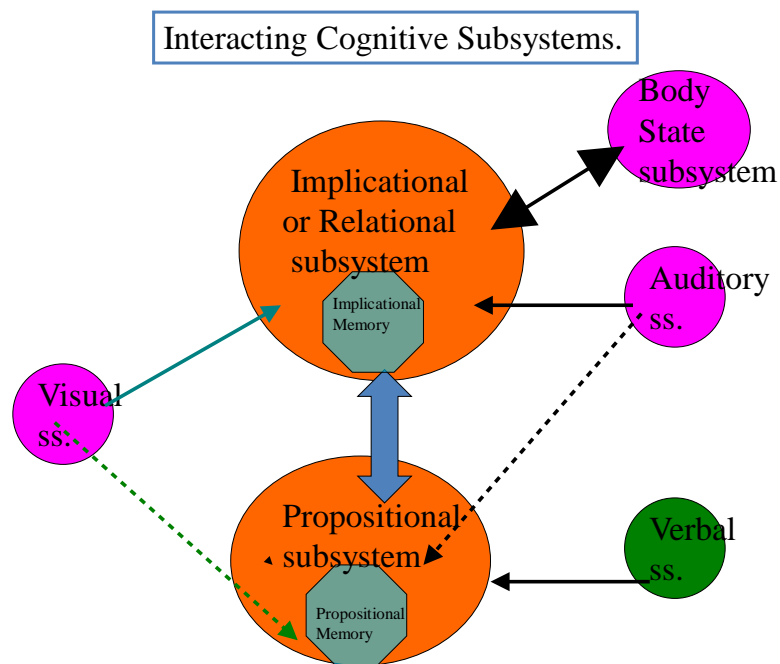
Over millennia, human beings have not had a problem with transcendence. They have experienced themselves as part of a mysterious universe, in communication and relationship with forces and entities beyond the physical. They inhabited a porous world, infused with spirit: whether attached to the physical such as springs, groves, sun and moon; the once physical as ancestors, or more disembodied entities. The sense of a super-ordinate entity, a boss god or goddess, emerged over time and tended to gain ascendance. At the same time as using their logical intelligence to survive and make themselves at home in the tangible, physical world, our ancestors developed rituals and practices to tame and harness those unseen forces, with a recognition that these procedures will inevitably lack the predictability relied upon in their management of the physical world. Priests and shamans with expertise in dealing with the unseen world were accorded status in the community.

What changed? A world view that was obvious for the majority of human history has now become deeply problematic, requiring special pleading. This is the topic that I intend to cover in this paper. I will start by examining the dominant assumptions, wrapped up in the scientific world view, that shape contemporary mental space and marginalize the perspective outlined in the previous paragraph. This will lead on to unpacking what is meant by ‘transliminal’, a generally unfamiliar term, but one needed to understand that marginalized facet of human experiencing. This opens up a different perspective on relationship, the self and the human being; a perspective that plucks spirituality/religion from the margins and locates these at the heart of what it is to be human. Viewed from this perspective, transcendence is no longer a problematic concept in need of justification. It regains its place as the fundamental context for human experience. Other concepts, such as the diagnostic view of mental illness, are incidental casualties of this reversal of perspective.

There are two assumptions that lurk in the background of contemporary thinking, constraining its scope, subtly and unobserved. They determine the questions that the highly successful, scientific enterprise addresses, and limit the way in which they are addressed. I will now tackle the first, which I call the 'rationality assumption' (Clarke 2008 P. 17).

From the writings of Plato and Aristotle, through Abelard and Aquinas in the 12th and 13th centuries, via the Renaissance to the triumph of science ushered in by the age of Newton, modern man has been seduced by the power of reason. Reason undoubtedly does have power. Its success in terms of taming the environment and assuring comfort, predictability and survival for those of us in privileged situations is undeniable, and I acknowledge my debt to its achievements. The problem is that this very success masks its limits and that reason, represented by either/or logic, is only half of the story. Experience – a largely disregarded way of knowing - is at least equally significant, as can be illustrated by considering relationships. When asked what is of central importance to their life, most people cite relationships. Yet reason is little help in navigating this vital area of our lives; here we rely in feeling, on intuition and on experience.

As a species we are very prone to delusion – in particular the delusion that each of us is a self-sufficient, self-contained, entity, in charge, at the centre of the universe. Copernicus and Galileo managed to put paid to this complacency on a cosmological level; Freud and the growth of awareness of the significance of the unconscious has chipped away at it at the psychological level, but there is still a distance to travel before we really acknowledge the limitations that the operation of the human brain sets on our omniscience and individual self-sufficiency.



Teasdale and Barnard's model of Cognitive Architecture

To make sense of this limitation and our ability to ignore it, I appeal to a model of the way the connections in our brains work that is both soundly based on the findings of fundamental cognitive science and explains a lot about the trickier aspects of being human. Interacting Cognitive Subsystems, (ICS, Teasdale and Barnard 1993), is a model of cognitive architecture that tracks the different coding, memory stores and processing systems that govern our faculties such as vision, speech, movement, arousal, and how these are integrated.

Teasdale and Barnard conclude that these are organized in subsystems (the modular brain) which are integrated by two overarching meaning making systems that work together most of the time, but not always. These share control, passing it backwards and forwards, so that there is no 'boss' – in contrast to our conscious experience of a unified, directing, self. One subsystem, the propositional, organises the verbal side of the operation and manages precise, logical, thought. The other, the implicational and the older, default system, co-ordinates all the senses and the body's arousal system, thereby overseeing emotion and the management of relationship. The assumption that rational knowledge is the only valid way of knowing comes from privileging the propositional over the implicational. Another way into this argument is provided by McGilchrist (2009), who identifies the propositional with the left brain, characterising it as the emissary who has usurped the position of the master. Knowledge derived from experience and intuition is marginalised. Included in this sphere of knowledge is knowledge of relationship, with its central importance to any human being. Among experience of relationship, the sense of relationship with that which is beyond, the deepest and furthest, within which we are contained, still persists, despite the scorn of science. It is to this 'subjugated' way of knowing (Foucault 1980) that we must turn to understand the transcendent.

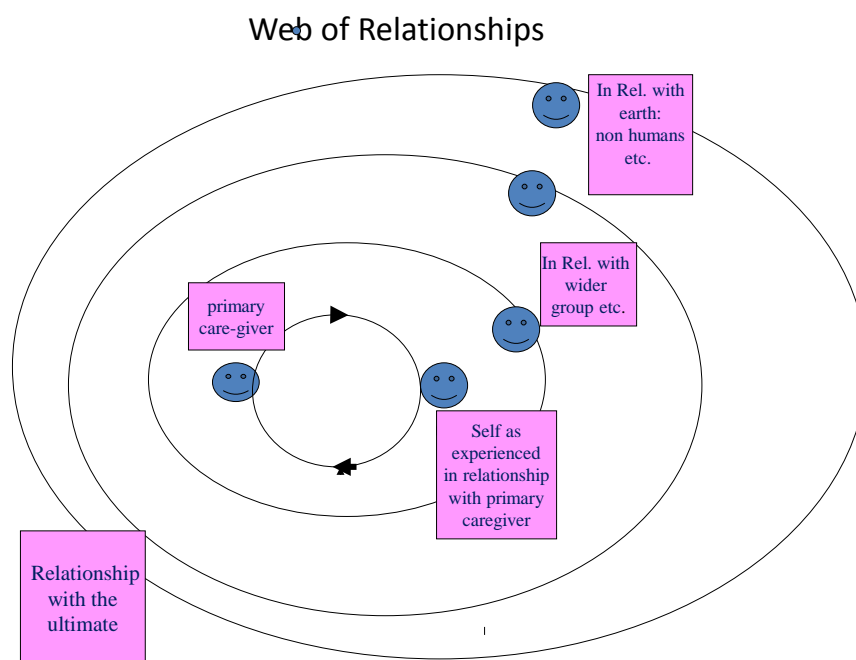
To explore this further, we need to consider the other assumption that limits the reach of contemporary knowledge; an assumption about the human being that I like to call the 'billiard ball mind' assumption (Clarke 2008 P.18-21). The experience of self-contained, self-directed, self-conscious self-sufficiency is real enough. It represents the propositional and implicational working together with a degree of propositional dominance. Where the implicational starts to take over more, the potential of stepping out of our individuality beckons. We can lose ourselves in a sunset, in music, in love, or in a crowd. If we enter more fully into that potential, we can start to lose our individuality and merge – whether with the crowd, the music, the other or the universe. This place of openness for some can mean drawing in 'other minds', interchange of psychic contents, whether experienced as telepathy, past lives, or contact with spirits etc. To reach this state means to have crossed a threshold, a limen; to have entered the transliminal (a term adopted by Claridge, 1997, from Thalbourne, Thalbourne et al. 1997). As this is a place with no time, precognition (and flashbacks) become accessible. These ideas are explored in more depth in Clarke (2010a and 2008).

The possibility of this transliminal state demonstrates that the contained self is only part of the story. Of course, accessing this place of openness, of vulnerability, is easier for some

people than for others, as people vary where they sit on the schizotypy spectrum (Claridge 1997, 2010). The transliminal is a place of extremes, of contradictions and of paradox, that are governed not by the familiar logic of 'either /or' but by the disconcerting and radically ungraspable logic of 'both/and'. This way of knowing contains the extremes of mysticism and madness and holds both equally in its embrace.

The transcendent is experienced in this state; the only evidence we have for it is the experience, held with powerful conviction, of relationship with 'the beyond' and reported by humans throughout history. However, because of the limitations of propositional knowledge, we can feel more than we can precisely know, so that the validity of this knowledge cannot be pinned down in either/or terms. But neither should it be dismissed.

According to this perspective, when grounded in the propositional a person experiences their individuality. On the other hand, the implicational finds coherence only within a web of relationship. Neither state is stable. The self is process, constantly in flux between the two.



The primary relationship at the heart of the web gives us our first understanding of ourselves, and its nature is knitted into us at the deepest level (as described by attachment theory, Bowlby 1977). However, this relationship is embedded in other relationships, spreading further and deeper, reaching both out and in towards the transcendent. All these relationships and their nature are in one sense a part of us. Thus, when the link between the two central meaning making systems loosens, leading to encounter with the transliminal, we have the potential to step beyond our individuality into this place of relationship, a place where we lose our individual boundedness and merge with the whole; a place where our familiar sense of self, with all the certainty and safety that that implies, is lost.

Where the ability to pass back and forth across the 'limen' the threshold, is retained, this can be a blissful and creative experience. Where that ability is weaker, though the experience may be positive to start with, it can soon become disorienting and persecutory, leading to feelings of invasion; disturbing experiences can become the norm.

Re-appraising what it is to be a human being by making space for transcendence and putting the spiritual at its heart also entails a re-appraisal of psychosis; not just a nasty illness, but a getting lost in a vastness and potentiality that is normally governed by the limitations of our processing capacity. The 'other reality' of the mystics, and the hell of the person with a distressing psychosis (not the only sort, I hasten to add) is simply access to a 'reality' that we can never possess but which, given our limitations, we can only glimpse. We need to respect the mystery represented by the part that we are unable to grasp even partially, and acknowledge its importance, as well as respecting the journey of those who have ventured furthest into these un-mapped territories, whether labelled mystic or psychotic.

As a final word, this perspective has the potential to offer a non stigmatizing re-appraisal for those diagnosed with psychosis. A greater sense of self-esteem is a useful start for signing somebody up to take responsibility both for their situation and any attendant risk, as has been found in practice when the therapeutic approach based on this theoretical model has been applied (see: Clarke 2013, 2010b). Such an approach is in line with the learning afforded by the compelling research literature demonstrating that a benign way of making sense of anomalous experiencing as opposed to one of pathologizing has a beneficial result on outcome in terms of the individual's life and life goals (Brett et al. 2013, 2009, 2007, Heriot-Maitland, Knight & Peters 2012, Lovatt et al. 2010). This body of emerging evidence demonstrates the vital need for an alternative way of making sense of wayward journeys into the transliminal, hence the importance of the charity, the Spiritual Crisis Network www.SpiritualCrisisNetwork.org.uk. See also www.isabelclarke.org and for further reading, 'Madness, Mystery and the Survival of God' ('O'Books, 2008) and 'Psychosis and Spirituality: consolidating the new paradigm (Wiley, 2010).

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