A Psychospiritual Integration Frame of Reference for Occupational Therapy. Part 3: Contemplative Epistemic Foundations

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines in some detail the epistemological and ontological foundations of the psychospiritual integration (PSI) frame of reference—a practice framework for occupational therapy informed and constituted in part by an Asian (specifically Buddhist) knowledge base and in part by Western intellectual and Christian theological sources. It discusses possible implications for occupational therapy practice within the dominant and hegemonic evidence-based paradigm and proposes a critical contemplative and wisdom-based approach to occupational therapy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In my second essay on the psychospiritual integration (PSI) frame of reference, I introduced several new occupational concepts derived from non-Western cultural practice and outlined contours of a PSI-informed occupational therapy practice. I suggested ideas and tools for enhancing and transforming occupational therapy practice through specific application of the PSI frame of reference.

In this essay, I build on my previous essays to examine more deeply the epistemic foundations of PSI, with respect to its epistemology and ontology—derived from Asian and specifically Buddhist premises—and how they shape the thinking behind the model. Notwithstanding from the fact that epistemo-ontology aside, the structure and content of PSI also include and integrate Western occupational therapy and related concepts. I raise provocative questions about the uncritical assimilation of evidence-based rhetoric embedded in power relations, economic interests, and cultural privilege at a time of declining Western influence and a resurgent Asia led by China and India. I admit that the very attempt to formulate a “professionally credible” and “elegant” model for addressing “spirituality” in “clinical” occupational therapy is arguably an act inextricable from culture, worldview, and value judgments that are relative, contextual, and bounded in history. But all models and frames of reference, and all modern professions, including that of occupational therapy and its corollary discipline of occupational science, can be subjected to the same critique.

Currently, the dominant and hegemonic paradigm is evidence-based practice and its discursive construction of notions of health, wellbeing, spirituality,

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2 See Kang, “Transformative Occupations” 55–64.
3 See e.g., Beeson 244–254; Leonard 109–134; and White 31–64.
occupation, and indeed occupational science and occupational therapy. I propose
that non-Western perspectives that have much to contribute to these notions have
been marginalized and silenced, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Iwama
and Hammell have argued for the need to incorporate non-Western voices and
perspectives in occupational therapy theory construction. In particular, Hammell
warns against the dangers of cultural conformity, theoretical deficiencies, and
colonial practice in current constructions of theory that are predominantly
Anglophonic.4 Adopting a postcolonial, futures oriented, multi-civilizational lens,
I attempt to “decolonize” the future and rescue it from foreclosure by modernist
visions of progress—images predominantly and narrowly defined in technorationalistic, capitalistic, anti-theistic, and militaristic terms. I draw on noted
futurist Inayatullah’s concept of “used future” to critique the business-as-usual and
more-of-the-same economic rationalism fixated on a technological panacea to all
problems.6 Seen in this light, a critical deconstructive approach to occupational
therapy knowledge is warranted.

In addition, this paper adopts a Buddhist-informed contemplative
epistemology that does not privilege sense perception and inferential reasoning as
sole sources of knowledge. Rather, a contemplative way of knowing is one that
takes the time to listen, be attentive, and enter into deep cognitive, affective, and
conative silence so that direct intuitive knowledge can arise. Such contemplative
knowing transcends sense perception and inference, laying aside conceptual and

4 See Iwama, “Toward Culturally Relevant” 582-588 and particularly Hammell, “Reclaiming Global
Wisdom” 718-721 for extensive critiques of Anglophonic constructions of occupational therapy
theory that threaten to marginalize and silence African, Asian, Pacific island, Indigenous, southeast
European, and Middle Eastern voices to the detriment of culturally safe and effective occupational
therapy practice.
5 See e.g., Inayatullah, “Non-Western Perspectives” 55–61 and Sardar 179–187.
6 See Inayatullah, “Questioning” 23–48 for a poststructural toolkit called causal layered analysis for
unpacking a range of possible, probably, and preferred futures.
linguistic elaborations to penetrate into the heart of the object known. In it, there is a union of knower and the known in such a way as to thoroughly transform the knower.

The knowledge emerging from contemplation is better termed “wisdom”—an integrative and transformative insight that defies our attempts to grasp it conceptually, prematurely closing it into an ossified thought structured devoid of life. Contemplative wisdom is fresh and unimpeded, direct, and stark, sheer luminosity free of duality and separation. Contemplative wisdom is non-dual knowledge. In other words, all experience is said to be luminous by virtue of its consciously clear quality such that without this quality, there would be no experience to speak of. The luminosity of contemplative wisdom is such that the experience is one of sheer clarity and knowing devoid of bifurcation of inherent self and other. Another key aspect of contemplative wisdom is its openness to revelation—a breaking of pure knowledge into consciousness situated in space, time, and history from the unconditioned ground of reality that lies beyond.

Because contemplative wisdom embraces intuitive insight and revelatory knowledge as equally legitimate sources of knowledge, it breaks out of the dominant discourse that privileges empiricism and rationalism to the exclusion of any other epistemology. In this sense, contemplative wisdom is a subversion of dominant epistemologies, an expression of hitherto marginalized modes of knowing with much potential to offer humanity in the twenty-first century.

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7 Contemplative voices from Buddhist (e.g., Fenner and Wallace, “Contemplative Science”) and Christian (e.g., Keating, Main, and Merton) traditions testify to this nondual subjectivity and knowledge borne of contemplative praxis.

8 See discussion on cross-religious examples of contemplative knowledge in Wallace, “Mind” 169–186.
2. EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology, as a branch of Western philosophy rooted in Greek culture and civilization, is concerned with the study of how we know what we know. In other words, epistemology is the study of modes of knowing and what constitutes knowledge itself. Modes of knowing are the means by which we acquire knowledge of some phenomena in question, the ways by which we come to know something.

The PSI frame of reference is constructed out of epistemologies outside the dominant framework of materialist empiricism and rationalism per se. However, does the “scientific materialist” lens evaluate PSI fairly?

I suggest that it does not. First, the mere fact that the PSI frame of reference utilizes contemplative wisdom as a source of knowledge does not make it anti-empirical, anti-rational, and anti-scientific. Rather, PSI’s epistemology is trans-empirical; it is not confined to and goes beyond purely empirical considerations. Similarly, PSI’s epistemology is trans-rational; it draws on knowledge beyond that which derives from mere observation (i.e., empiricism) and inferential reasoning (i.e., rationalism), rather than excluding them. In the same vein, I would describe PSI as a frame of reference that is trans-scientific. Without delving too deeply now into the philosophy of science and what constitutes science per se, I propose that trans-scientific epistemology refuses to be dictated by the scientific method as presently defined but does not reject it outright. Adopting a trans-scientific epistemology, PSI valorizes hitherto marginalized modes of knowing that take into account scientific measurement and reasoning yet transcend them to embrace direct intuitive insight and trans-anthropocentric revelation as real epistemological possibilities.

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Secondly, the epistemological mode of contemplative wisdom cannot be justly and unproblematically written off as unscientific, insofar as its spirit of rigorous inquiry evinces an attitude of probing curiosity and unbiased observation quite consonant with the scientific attitude. A truly scientific attitude is one that is unafraid to explore the diversity of knowable phenomena with a diversity of ways of knowing, regardless of preconceived ideas, biases, prejudices, and agendas of instrumental and pragmatic gain. To write off contemplative wisdom as a possible epistemology due to common caricatures of it as ethereal or otherworldly, impractical, or economically unproductive is neither warranted by nor consistent with the touted ideological values of science.

Thirdly, contemplative wisdom as a way of knowing has been rigorously practiced and transmitted by full-time contemplatives across Western and Asian cultures over long historical timespans. From the Desert Fathers in the Middle East and Benedictine monks in Europe to the Yogis of India, Lamas of Tibet, and Zen monks of China and Japan, spanning geographical locations from caves and groves to monasteries and temples both East and West, contemplative methodology has been painstakingly honed, refined, tested by contemplative practitioners and meticulously documented in rarely publicized textual accounts (Wallace, “Contemplative” 58–91; Wallace, “Mind” 7–13).

Taken together, these three reasons provide a compelling if not persuasive argument for open-minded exploration of non-dominant epistemologies such as contemplative wisdom. Taking a critically reflexive attitude to dominant paradigms of knowledge, the PSI frame of reference draws upon the alternate

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10 Arguments for a scientifically robust contemplative mode of inquiry can be found in Wallace, “Contemplative Science” 28–93; Wallace and Hodel 27–107; and Wallace, “Meditations” 15–71. Arguments for an integral embrace of multiple epistemologies and ontologies beyond scientific materialism and imperialism can be found in Wilber 59–85.
epistemology of contemplative wisdom comprising direct intuitive insight and trans-anthropocentric revelation.\textsuperscript{11} While these alternate modes of knowing have been silenced and marginalized in Western rationalistic cultures particularly from the age of scientific Enlightenment and subsequent industrial revolutions, they were nevertheless preserved, tested, developed, practiced, lived and embodied in contemplative communities on the fringes of Western societies.

In Asia, these contemplative modes of knowing flourished in diverse contemplative communities across many Asian cultures including India, Tibet, Nepal, China, Japan, Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, to name a few. Modernity, with the encounter of Asian memes with Western industrial and scientific concepts, has brought about innovations in contemplative practices that sparked widespread dissemination of contemplation amongst the lay non-specialist public. For example, the revitalization of \textit{vipassanā} (insight meditation) in Myanmar pioneered by the late Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) and others is a case in point (McMahan 502–505). More recently, the modern \textit{vipassanā} or secular mindfulness movement represented by a range of mindfulness-based, mindfulness-inspired therapies (e.g., mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy) and programs (e.g., mindfulness-based stress reduction) is another.\textsuperscript{12} In fostering a culturally safe and relevant occupational therapy, one that takes seriously the diversity of human cultural meaning-making and ways of knowing, the PSI frame of reference thus seeks to include such contemplative modes of knowledge within its repertoire of epistemologies. The use of empirical observation and rationalistic inquiry

\textsuperscript{11} See Bussey 187–198; and Wildman and Inayatullah 723–740 for discussions on the need and importance of boundary-transcending pluralism in our learning pedagogies for the future.

\textsuperscript{12} For a critical discussion on what has been termed the Modern Vipassana Movement (MVM), see Wallace, “Meditations” 177–184.
complements the epistemological mainstay of contemplative wisdom in the conceptualization, organization, and application of the PSI frame of reference.

3. **ONTOLOGY**

The PSI frame of reference also espouses an ontology that extends beyond the dominant paradigm of scientific materialism. Ontology is that branch of Western philosophy pertaining to the study of what is real or existent. It questions and investigates what truly exists and what it means to say that something exists. Ontology is about how things really exist in the final analysis, with what is their ultimate status as existents or existing things.

* Scientific Materialism and Functional Contextualism

The dominant ontological paradigm in modern science is arguably that of scientific materialism, resting upon the correspondence theory of truth. Scientific materialism assumes that the ultimately real is material in constitution and nature. In other words, everything that exists can be finally reduced to material substance and properties: nothing non-material can be said to exist. Seen in this light, all psychological, cognitive, and social phenomena and events are ultimately grounded in matter; they are mere emergent properties or epi-phenomena of the primary reality of matter (Wallace, “Meditations” 76–78). There are alternative ontologies in modern science (for example, critical realism), but scientific materialism continues to be the dominant paradigm.

The emerging a-ontology of functional contextualism (in psychology) would seem to be an improvement, as it makes no assumptions about ontology per
Functional contextualism claims to be agnostic concerning what ultimately exists. It instead focuses on what is efficacious in the pragmatic sense. It espouses the pragmatic criterion of truth: what is real and true is what works. Such a view is in keeping with postmodern relativist ethos.

Nonetheless, both scientific materialism and functional contextualism are permeated by the unspoken meme and *telos* (end) of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentric or human-centered discourse about what is real and what works occurs in the overarching context of human needs, desires, wants, happiness and suffering, benefit, and loss. In other words, all our intellectual and occupational pursuits are focused on and directed towards self-occupied human wellbeing. It is so deeply ingrained and naturalized as axiomatically true that it is something of which we are barely cognizant, let alone something that we question.

Radically different than scientific materialism and functional contextualism, PSI adopts and espouses a contextual nominalist ontology. It is culturally bound, but so are all ontologies. It differs sharply from that of the dominant ontology of scientific materialism and the emerging a-ontology of functional contextualism because rather than anthropocentrism, the meme and *telos* of PSI is *transcendental logocentrism*—a way of viewing reality that transcends solely human concerns to reach into the beyond that is the ground and source of being. Explication of the logic and structure of contextual nominalism now follows.

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13 For a brief but clear discussion on functional contextualism as a philosophy of science underpinning a model of cognitive-behavioral therapy known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, see Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 30–39.
Contextualism Nominalism

In contextual nominalism, “nominal” refers to the reasoning that all phenomena are dependently designated rather than existing inherently in their own right. The linguistically and conceptually constructed nature of all things, persons, and events point to the impossibility of any phenomena in the cosmos of standing alone and autonomously in their inherent being. Rather, all things depend on mental imputation upon valid bases that are themselves designated upon further valid bases *ad infinitum*. This does not mean that things do not exist at all. Rather, they exist as dependent and contingent phenomena inseparable from language and conception.

A valid basis is any phenomenon that serves as a basis for intersubjectively consented designation or naming. For example, a car is designated based on a particular assembly of parts such as tires, doors, windscreens, upholstered seats, gears, engine, steering wheel, petrol tank, battery and so on. Take away any of these parts and the car ceases to be a car as we know it or at the very least ceases to be the same car. We may continue to call it a “car” by virtue of our conceptual and linguistic imputation of the label “car” upon the new assembly of “car” parts. The reason we call and conceive of it as “car” rather than “horse” is due to the cultural and linguistic frames of reference in which we are embedded. Within a common frame of reference, we intersubjectively agree to designate a patterned collection of “car” parts as a “car” rather than as something else. Thus, the existence of the “car” is not inherent in some physical or metaphysical essence of “car” but contingently emergent on the basis of mental imputation (imputed car) upon a valid basis (basis of imputation consisting of a specific collection of “car” parts). In other words, a car is a car because we call it a car on the basis of its parts.

Nominalism as conceived in this way is equivalent to the deontological analysis of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamika or Middle Way Consequentialism (Tsering
Middle Way Consequentialism is a school of classical Buddhist philosophy that the Tibetan tradition describes as originating from the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna (2nd century C.E.) and was subsequently elaborated by his philosophical successors like Buddhapālita (5th century C.E.) and Chandrakīrti (7th century C.E.) in India. It is also identified with thinkers like Sengzhao (4th–5th century C.E.) and Jizang (6th–7th century) in China. The Middle Way School’s fundamental ontological position may be termed “ontic indeterminacy”—the radically nominalist construction of phenomena and the impossibility of anything existing independently and essentially, standing on their own ground apart from the conceptual and linguistic matrix constitutive of their existence.

The term “context” in contextual nominalism refers to the environment, ethos, matrix, and framework within which every phenomenon subsists and has its being. Context is the shared sphere of experience and meanings as well as the shared process of attributing identity, meaning, and value to things, events, and persons in space, time, and history (Iwama 19). Nothing in the cosmos can exist in the absence of a context that in a sense constitutes it. Strip phenomena away from their context (if that is even possible) and we end up with an absence that defy apprehension. In other words, we are left with nothing.

But, since all phenomena are inextricably embedded in and subsisting on their culturally bound conceptual and linguistic context, a non-erroneous perception and view of the ontological status of phenomena is that of non-inherency and indeterminacy. Experientially, such ontic non-inherency and indeterminacy manifests as a space-like openness and luminosity of phenomena in the face of the consciousness apprehending them. In other words, for a

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14 For a historical and philosophical treatment of the Buddhist notion of emptiness across different thinkers and schools in India and China, see e.g., Keown and Prebish 165–168, 174–176, and 238–242.
consciousness that correctly perceives and views things as they really are (that is in their final ontological status), they appear and are experienced as unfrozen, unbounded, luminous, transparent, and devoid of unchanging solidity. In this perception and view, there is a non-duality of subject and object to the extent that all dualistic appearances cease. There is seamlessness of experience beyond words and concepts.

As a frame of reference that addresses spirituality in occupational therapy practice, PSI is ontologically grounded in contextual nominalism and reflexively applies the same to itself. Seen in this light, PSI as a frame of reference does not claim to be universally valid and ontically determinate in its own right. Rather, PSI is itself culturally bound, conceptually and linguistically constructed, dependently designated. As such, PSI does not expect universal assent to its assertions; neither does it seek to impose its theoretical constructs on all occupational therapists as they seek to address spiritual issues in their practice. Yet, to the extent that PSI is informative, enriching, deepening, useful and efficacious in its application to occupational therapy across cultures and societies, to that extent is its ontological validity established.

Furthermore, PSI’s articulation of spirituality comprising six inter-embedded dimensions of becoming, meaning, being, centeredness, connectedness, and transcendence\(^\text{15}\) is contextually and nominally defined. Spiritual wellness and wholeness as integral harmony and activation of these six dimensions is not divorced from contextual factors of culture, class, gender, socioeconomic status, geography, ethnicity, and political climate. Nor are they inherently established without recourse to the intersubjective matrix of language and conceptual structures in which persons are enmeshed. In PSI, the Buddhist

\(^{15}\) These concepts are more thoroughly discussed and detailed in Kang, “Conceptual foundations” 92-103.
notion of emptiness as contingent designation of all phenomena serves as the pivot around which PSI’s six dimensions of spirituality turn, the groundless ground upon which they stand. Furthermore, the dimension of transcendence speaks to the vision and perspective of all experiential data as devoid of ontic density, autonomous essence, and thus transparently seamless with an equally empty and free subjectivity.

4. CRITICAL CONTEMPLATIVE ANALYSIS

Having dealt with the epistemology and ontology of the PSI frame of reference, I will now analyze related concepts of health and wellbeing, spirituality, occupation, occupational science, and occupational therapy from a critical contemplative perspective. I wish to reveal hidden cultural assumptions underpinning these concepts, particularly assumptions pertaining to epistemology and ontology. When assumptions are not illuminated, they cannot be problematized, and without problematizing these assumptions, the cultural bias and politics of knowledge contributing to conceptual hegemony and theoretical imperialism remain unrecognized, much less dealt with.

My analysis rests on the work of thinkers such as Habermas, Vattimo, and Linklater, with contributions from advocates of non-Western perspectives such as Said, Sardar, Inayatullah, and Bussey. The critical theory emerging from the 20th century Frankfurt School critiques the inequitable and constrained communication of individuals and groups that are not truly free to speak. In critical theory’s problematique of human communication, the marginalized and the oppressed, the colonized and the silenced, lack equal opportunities and resources compared to those in privileged and dominant cultures to define what is real, good, and beautiful. Moreover, the cognitive interests underlying humanity’s knowledge production are skewed in favor of instrumental rationality—the utilitarian value
of doing x to obtain y. Emancipatory cognitive interests—the moral and volitional imperative to seek freedom and equality of all peoples from imposed constraints that undermine human flourishing—continue to be marginalized and denied by those who hold power in our world. This fact is particularly salient in this age of the corporatized university that some have described as “whackademia”—a “repressive and constricting work culture currently operating in our universities [that] has turned these institutions into functional, rather soulless commercial enterprises rather than places of passion, spark, spontaneity and curiosity relevant to a vibrant and truly engaged democracy” (Hil 22).

A contemplative wisdom point of view asserts that there is a valid knowledge that goes beyond anthropocentrism and utilitarian concerns. Contemplative analysis subverts and reverses commonly assumed and unquestioned notions of health, wellbeing, spirituality, occupation, and occupational science. Contemplative wisdom comprising direct intuitive insight and trans-anthropocentric revelation at once reaffirms and challenges our assumptions of human agency, structural force, environmental pressures, and social dynamics.

From the ground and perspective of contemplative wisdom, a rigorous analysis of phenomena—inclusive of positivist, phenomenological, hermeneutical, critical, and poststructural approaches—can begin to take place denuded (at least relatively) of self-occupied and potential-constricting desires, interests, biases, afflictive emotions, and ignorance.
The PSI frame of reference that I advocate is a distinctive synthesis of multiple epistememes comprising Asian philosophies, concepts of Western occupational therapy, and theoretical framing and categories (e.g., architecture of frame of reference) stemming from American occupational therapy scholarship (e.g., Kielhofner). By drawing on non-dominant contemplative epistemology and critical reflexivity that subverts hegemony and gives voice to the silenced, this PSI frame of reference enables and empowers a critical contemplative analysis of key concepts of health and wellbeing, spirituality, occupation, and occupational science from a multi-civilizational perspective. More than that, PSI offers itself as an example of wisdom-based occupational therapy that seeks to be mindful of occupational therapy's cultural boundedness in theory, epistemology, ontology, and practice.

Health
From a critical contemplative perspective, health is a notion that has been defined largely from an anthropocentric evaluation in terms of physical, psychological, and social wellbeing (see e.g., World Health Organization). Whether conceived as personal or public health, such wellbeing has received attention from occupational therapists in terms of the categories of doing, being, and becoming (Wilcock 255). In its first iteration, PSI follows the above line of reasoning that locates health and wellbeing within the individual or group in context. However, a critical contemplative analysis of health and wellbeing impels us to extend their meanings beyond what has been described above. Thus, in the present iteration, PSI re-examines the notions of health and wellbeing in trans-anthropocentric terms that transcend the person, occupation, and environment.
In light of this, PSI asserts that health is in the final analysis not a state or condition of body, mind, sociality, or spirituality per se but a luminosity transcending all states and conditions. Even when the physical, cognitive, affective, volitional, social, and spiritual world of the person has degenerated to the extent of collapse, health can still be found in the transcendent that enters our brokenness and darkness such that a luminous immanence alone shines. None of this can be achieved by our performance, self-directed effort, or merit of any kind. Such infusion of health in spite of all deprivation, disability, and disease is dependent on nothing human will can produce or control. The best way of describing this transcendentally infused luminosity that, in the final analysis is designated as health under PSI, is pure unadulterated grace. In Buddhist Dzogchen terminology, such health-giving luminosity is uncontrived resting in the pristine awareness and spontaneous presence that together constitute the innermost nature of human consciousness. Awareness is pristine because it is utterly free of dualistic notions and fixations, resting as a centerless clearing through which one's life world unimpededly flows.\(^6\) The unblocked and creative manifestations of one's life world, with all its variegated events, persons, objects, and contexts, emerging and dissolving non-dually in the space of awareness constitute spontaneous presence.

Such grace is not immediately understandable by empirical logic but can only be apprehended and comprehended by the epistemology of contemplative wisdom—namely the knowledge of trans-anthropocentric revelation. In, by, and through grace, the decay and decease of the motor, cognitive, affective, volitional, social and spiritual functions of the person does not signal the absence of health. Instead, a grace-illumined and grace-transformed human condition is one of health in the spirit in spite of all visible and material signs to the contrary. In this vein, PSI locates grace as in-breaking immanence within the field of

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\(^6\) See Fenner 9-83 and 193-245.
transcendence, the sixth dimension of spirituality as articulated in PSI (Kang, “Conceptual Foundations” 98).

PSI’s articulation of human spirituality in terms of six interpenetrating dimensions of becoming, meaning, being, centeredness, connectedness, and transcendence now faces inexplicable incursion into transcendence itself. Grace, as that which/who is infinitely beyond all created and conditioned phenomena, breaks through from eternity into history to confer and enable a certain kind of health that does not depend on any contingency of this world as we know it. For PSI, human spirituality comes to an end in the meeting ground between the innermost essence of who we are—transcendence—and the living Spirit who transcends transcendence and yet is ever present in the immanence of this moment, this place, this time, this body, this mind, this spirit. Spirituality comes to an end in pure grace—unearned, unmerited, undeserved and yet ever present for all to receive in open surrender.1

In the Buddhist Pure Land articulation of “Other Power” (Jp. tariki) and Nichiren Buddhist notion of “eternal original Buddha” (Jp. hombutsu), we find a strikingly resonant notion of personal liberation deriving from the merit and power of Another who has taken the place of oneself in cultivating the virtues required for wholeness and wellbeing. While the term “grace” derives from and is most identified with Christian monotheism, it is not an inaccurate description of the sense of almost ineffable “transference” of virtue and wholeness from an ultimate Other that personally encounters one’s innermost being.

Occupationally, a person encountering grace may or may not be engaged in purposeful and meaningful doing of any kind. In my second essay on PSI, I have articulated the concepts of meta-, non- and trans-occupation and so will not repeat

1 For a Christian perspective on grace as unmerited favor, see Yancey.
the explication here. Suffice to say that rather than viewing occupation as fundamental and universal to human nature, PSI affirms (perhaps subversively) that beyond all doing and non-doing of our humanness is the essence of consciousness held and embraced by grace surpassing all bounded understanding. Seen in this light, occupational science as a field of study that purports to scientifically investigate the nature of human occupation and occupational nature would need to reflect more profoundly on its epistemological and ontological premises, taking into account multi-cultural, non-ethnocentric, and non-dominant voices that transcend known paradigms of positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and poststructuralism. For contemplative wisdom—comprising direct intuitive insight and trans-anthropocentric revelation—challenges us to look outside the box of our prized assumptions and cherished identities.

The foregoing discussion points to the tentative shape of an emerging occupational therapy that problematizes the implicit anthropocentric, Western hegemonic assumptions that underpin much if not all of occupational therapy theory. This shape is defined by a multi-civilizational perspective reflexively mindful of its own potential for theoretical imperialism (Hammell, “Resisting” 28–29), embracing of multiple epistemologies especially non-dominant marginalized ones such as contemplative wisdom, a radically counter-hegemonic ontology of contextual nominalism, and critical reflexivity that problematizes the politics of knowledge and shallowness of cognitive interests. In short, I propose a wisdom-based occupational therapy that is critically reflexive, ontologically open, and contemplative.

I envisage a wisdom-based occupational therapy as one that is unafraid to question and deconstruct its own assumptions, many of which are hidden from view. In so doing, fresh perspectives on occupation, occupational nature, health, spirituality, occupational enablement can be given space to emerge. PSI represents
a case in point of what a wisdom-based occupational therapy may look like. In articulating its domain of concern, PSI seeks to include multi-civilizational constructions of spirituality without marginalizing either secularity or religiosivity. The risk of excluding religious and faith-based perspectives (perspectives that continue to have force in large populations of people) in theoretical constructions of spirituality is very real in our age of modernist skepticism and anti-theism. In fact, such exclusion already occurs—arguably a form of theoretical imperialism that remains unacknowledged and unvoiced. It is timely and crucial to question hegemonic discourses presuming secular skepticism to redress this intellectual injustice in the interest of academic and theoretical integrity.

Another feature of wisdom-based occupational therapy, as I see it, is the re-privileging of what the profession calls therapeutic use of self in terms of the being of the therapist, not merely the doing (comprising enactment of skills and knowledge). The pressures and exigencies of what is called evidence-based practice, driven by economics and politics and underpinned by a flatland monocivilizational epistemology and ontology, have privileged what is obvious and measurable at the expense of the abstract and non-measurable. Not everything in life is visible and measurable nor should it be. A wisdom-based occupational therapy revalorizes the subtle unseen dimensions of the therapeutic process that some have called “art”—a term that nevertheless fails to fully capture the immensity of the ground of being that defies conceptual and linguistic categories.

In the PSI frame of reference, the concepts of being, centeredness, connectedness, and transcendence together give expression to the unseen ground of being that undergirds and suffuses a therapist’s therapeutic use of self. In other words, the spirituality of the therapist is central to the efficacious use of self for therapeutic purposes. Strictly speaking, the phrase “use of self” is not ideal in capturing the nuance and meaning of a wisdom-based therapeutic approach. This
is because in the deeper reaches and subtler moves of the therapeutic dance, the “self” no longer appears as it usually does. It is as if the “self” unveils as a chimera of conceptual and perceptual reification that is shot through with transparency and vastness. Such vastness and transparency is actual ontological status of “self” as seen through the eyes of contemplative wisdom.

More than that, the in-breaking of simultaneously transcendent and immanent grace decenters the self so completely that one’s whole identity is no longer self-subsisting but founded in none other than grace alone. Thus, in the naked moment of therapeutic selflessness, a boundless field of spontaneous openness and responsiveness manifests to alleviate the inevitable anguish, affliction, and suffering of existence. For a wisdom-based occupational therapist, therapeutic use of self dissolves into the plenitude of therapeutic selflessness where the therapist’s open and clear presence serves as a sky-like mirror for client angst, anguish, and affliction to be embraced, transmuted, and liberated. Such therapeutic presence also allows for innate healing qualities of the therapist such as compassion, mindfulness, attentional balance, and humor, for example, to manifest and work in the therapeutic encounter between therapist and client.

6. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have espoused in some detail the epistemology and ontology of the PSI frame of reference, offering a contemplative analysis of existing concepts of health, wellbeing, spirituality, occupation, and occupational science. In so doing, I have sketched a preliminary outline of what wisdom-based occupational therapy might look like. Through this and other essays on PSI, I hope that occupational therapists across cultures will be encouraged to theorize and reflect on the construction of occupational therapy in culturally relevant and safe ways that avoid the pitfall of theoretical imperialism (Hammell, “Sacred Texts” 6-13 and “Resisting”
This essay argues the importance of being reflexively mindful of how we consciously or unconsciously enact colonialism of ideas and practices in ways that privilege the elite dominant minority world while marginalizing the silent majority world. It further envisages that listening to non-Western (including Buddhist) perspectives in occupational therapy theory can help build a more robust and effective approach to health and therapeutic change in these uncertain times.
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