



Call for Papers

Straniak-Foundation Participation Grants

Institut für Religionswissenschaft
Universität Bern
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Intentional Transformative Experiences: Theorizing Self-Cultivation in Religion and Philosophy

International Conference at the University of Bern 30th of August until the 1st of September 2020

Organized by the *Institute for the Science of Religion* in cooperation with the *Center for Global Studies* (Bern), the research network *Philosophy in Global Perspective* of the German Society for Philosophy (DGPhil), the SNSF project “Experiments with Experience” (<http://experiments-with-experience.org>), and the *Hermann und Marianne Straniak-Foundation* (<http://straniak.com>).

Participants (confirmed):

Maya Burger, Lausanne
Bret W. Davies, Baltimore
Rolf Elberfeld, Hildesheim
Wouter Hanegraaff, Amsterdam
Jeffrey Kripal, Houston
Laurie Paul, New Haven
Kevin Schilbrack, Boone
Marcus Schmücker, Wien
Steven Sutcliffe, Edinburgh

- **Announcement:** For participants presenting a paper, twelve travel and participation grants of a maximum of EUR 1.000,— (accommodation, meals, conference costs; travel expenses up to EUR 500,—) are available, courtesy of the *Hermann und Marianne Straniak Foundation*. It is also possible to sign up as a participant without presentation (free of charge).
- **Presentation and Publication:** Accepted contributions to the conference will be assigned 20 min slots. The contributions to the conference will be published in an edited volume. Conference language is English.
- **Submission:** Please send your proposal (outline of max. one page) as an e-mail attachment no later than **April 15, 2020**, to:

Jens Schlieter (jens.schlieter@relwi.unibe.ch)

The Conference theme:

According to a long-standing belief, exceptional life-changing experiences (such as near-death experiences, or revelations) are ultimately beyond the individual's control—they simply “happen.” Such transformative experiences—addressed as awakening, enlightenment, encounter with the real, or conversion—possess the quality to transform the individual completely. However, it is well-attested fact that individuals actively search for transformative experiences, and intentionally induce alterations of their consciousness through specific practices, by way of exposing themselves to conducive environments, and the like. Significantly, such practices are often highly self-reflective—that is, they are reviewed and theorized by the practitioners and “experientialist” philosophers themselves.

Despite (a) classical approaches which describe the variety of “mystical experiences,” (b) theories informed by psychology (cognitive, transpersonal, or parapsychology), and (c) historical reconstructions of various ascetic “technologies of the self” (Foucault), such as Asian traditions of self-cultivation, there are still many open questions. How to

describe and theorize these intentional practices that result in actively induced experiential states? How to define processes of “transformation,” “cultivation,” or “alteration,” and how to analyze the assumed substrata of these processes, be it the “self,” the “Self,” “consciousness,” or “awareness”? How to explore their goals? How to compare autobiographical narratives of self-cultivation, and how to analyze reports and the philosopher-practitioners’ attempts to systematize intentional transformative experiences?

The conference will devote itself primarily to these theoretical questions. Participants are especially encouraged to engage with theoretical perspectives on intentional transformative experiences. While we do not expect participants to limit themselves to the following perspectives, we think that three recent paradigms are helpful for advancing fresh insights on transformative experiences: cognitive metaphor theory, narratology, and science studies. Metaphor theory appears very powerful because in the abstract and invisible realm of individual consciousness, “inner” experiences, and transformative processes, metaphors are indispensable for conveying descriptions. An age-old metaphor for human self-transformation, for example, is the caterpillar to butterfly metamorphosis; others are expanding consciousness, or broadening the Self, or to refine, sensitize, purify, slow-down, or accelerate experiences, etc. Paradigms of narratology are promising because they help us to reconstruct the narrated biographical settings of reported experiences, as well as the narratives that validate transformative experiences, and, most importantly, the narratives that convey the life-changing dimension of such experiences. Science studies, finally, hold a great potential on the ground that historians of experimental science can provide us with helpful tools to understand how intentionally designed settings of “experiments with experiences” can be analyzed. What is the “epistemic object” at the core of transformative experiences and practices of cultivation? How do practitioners deal with disappointment? How do they intentionally change the experiential settings? As such, the conference’s explicit focus on both spiritual/religious and philosophical protagonists, will add to our understanding of intentional transformative experiences.