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Chapter 1

Introduction

A responsible treatment of the concept of religion and its dimensions of practices, beliefs, and experiences is a cornerstone of the study of religion.¹ One of the, in our eyes, strongest accomplishments of this discipline has been the historicization and contextualization of key terms such as that of ‘religion’ itself, without which we would not be able to deal with the topic in a sensitive manner. The constantly changing forms of religious and spiritual engagement include an equally changing variety of reported religious experiences. An analysis of these experiences has proven to be a complicated and extensive task. Even the concept ‘religious experience’ itself has been the topic of a long struggle within the history of the study of religion. In this sense, it is a thorny issue. On the one hand, the dimension of experience is ascribed a high importance by many modern practitioners of religious traditions and within the spiritual and esoteric milieu.² Within the academic investigation of religion, this importance has been recognized and led at times to dubious theories that posited religious experience at the origin of religion as a class.³ On the other hand, experience is an unquestionably intangible concept, leaving only memory, narrative, and changes in life orientation, declared to be an outcome of this experience—again through the medium of the narrative—as possible evidence. This has led some to disregard ‘religious experience’ as a useful tool within the study of religion.⁴ Between these two extremes, calls for a responsible use of the term have been issued.⁵ With this edited volume, we hope to continue refining this concept that, despite its flaws, has a tremendous importance for adherents of religion—and therefore also for those who study them.

1 The authors of this introduction thank Laurie A. Paul, Karl Baier, and our anonymous peer reviewer for helpful comments, the Swiss National Foundation for funding the project ‘Experiments with Experience,’ in whose framework this edited volume was conceived, as well as the Open Access Publication Fund of the University Library of Bern. The contributions were initially presented at a conference in Bern, based on earlier work on intentional transformative experiences by one of the editors (Jens Schlieter), and generously funded by the Hermann und Marianne Straniak Stiftung, Vienna.

2 E.g., Hammer 2004, 331–453.

3 While phenomenologists like Rudolf Otto (1918) are the most obvious, more recent neurological theories similarly place experience at the bottom of a biological—rather than perennial—origin of religion.

4 E.g., Sharf 2012.

5 E.g., Taves 2009.

The difficulty of academically dealing with religious experiences lies in the variety of the reports of these, which requires a limitation of scope. This edited volume will therefore deal with experiences that are on the one hand intentionally sought after, while being on the other hand described as transformative or life changing. Exceptional life-changing experiences, such as near-death experiences or revelations, are often believed to be ultimately beyond the individual's control—they are thought to simply happen. Such transformative experiences—addressed for example as awakening, enlightenment, or conversion—are said to possess the quality to transform the individual completely. The model of passively received transformative experiences certainly has been described by many spiritual and religious protagonists, and, following the trajectory of their reports, by scholars interested in such revelatory transformative experiences. Yet the point that many transformative experiences are deliberately sought out has found much less attention. How do individuals search intentionally for such experiences—especially, if these experiences are at the same time considered to be an encounter with a numinous presence, or an interaction with a supernatural reality? How do the practitioners prepare the ground for them to happen, and on which basis do they form their action-guiding expectations? Furthermore, how are the expected or allegedly realized transformations conceptualized? What part or parts of the person is said to be transformed, and to what purpose?

The various authors of this volume will pick up topics connected to intentionality and transformation within the field of religious, spiritual, and esoteric practices. In four overarching contexts, they will draw connections between intentional transformative experiences and 1) theories that might explain their cognitive underpinnings; 2) the societal and cultural contexts in which they are embedded; 3) the personal histories and interpretations of the practitioners; and 4) individual (sub-) aspects of these concepts that can serve as further analytical tools. Every chapter will pick up one or more of these points and illustrate it with a case study from the Modern West or South and Central Asia. In this way, the intentionally sought direct experiences resulting from often long-term practices of various actors are put into different types of contexts, while serving as possible inspirations for further engagement with the topic. The choice of geographical and temporal delineation was taken on pragmatic grounds. To fully cover the global diversity in traditions, both historical and contemporary, would far exceed the scope of a single volume. Here, the goal was to first formulate new questions and approaches to the topic of intention transformative experiences. Due to the comprehensive literature on European, North American, and South Asian religious interconnections over the past two centuries, this scope seemed adequately diverse *and* contained to result in useful contrasts. In the future, we hope that contributions from other areas and times will be added—no doubt enriching the concept with their unique contexts and new methodologies.

To outline the above-mentioned questions and approaches, the introduction will first shortly address the most important terms. As already described, the central concept is experience. Although this term has already been extensively discussed in the literature of the study of religion, it should nevertheless here be defined in a fruitful way for the edited volume. Then, the concept of transformation is discussed. Transformation, too, contains different characteristics, which have been described and analyzed previously by various authors, whose work can be broadened and built upon in this volume. Finally, intentionality plays a key role in delineating and examining the case studies presented and will therefore be discussed. In a further step, historical, philosophical, and psychological perspectives on intentional transformative experiences are discussed. Finally, a chapter-by-chapter overview of the volume is offered, subdivided in the above-mentioned thematic cognitive, societal-cultural, personal, and conceptual focal points.

1 Experience

Experiences are at the core of each chapter within this book. It is therefore important that the term is operationalized. On the one hand, it is too broad a term to pass by without clearer definition; while on the other hand, the legacy of ‘experience’ within the study of religion has given the concept ideological baggage that must be avoided for a fruitful elaboration of the category to take place. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that much ink has already been spilled to describe the problems above. Therefore, this section will have as its main function to highlight the problems in order to see what there still is to gain by using the term ‘experience’ in connection to religion, spirituality and esotericism.

In a study on several key concepts within the English language, linguist Anna Wierzbicka points to the complex history of the term experience.⁶ Starting from the time of William Shakespeare, she distinguishes between six different meanings of the term. These range from the oldest meaning of experience as ‘accumulated knowledge’ to the newest meaning of ‘a current, subjective awareness-cum-feeling.’ Any consideration of a category as big as experience needs to take this diversity seriously. Usually, when studies of religion, spirituality and esotericism talk about experience, the focus is on the short-term, subjective meaning of experience. This type of experience can be characterized by an altered or changed state of awareness, knowledge, and/or feeling, which often has a clear beginning and ending. While we agree that this is the ‘typical’ religious or spiritual experience, it is important to keep in mind

⁶ Wierzbicka 2010, chap. 2.

the multiplicity of the term. We propose to denote this specific meaning, which can be defined tentatively as “a temporary, subjective change in awareness, knowledge, and/or feeling,” as *immediate experience*. As will be discussed below under ‘intentionality,’ such immediate experiences are often embedded in long periods of active practice, which in themselves can be denoted as long-term experiences as well. As long-term experiences in the religious domain, we think of those experiences that emerge from repeated, often ritualized behavior (e.g., meditation). In this case, long-term experiences may assume the form of a standardized (or summative) account built from a large number of individual experiences. One could illustrate this with multi-year enterprises as the writing of a book, or the process of holding down a certain job. These can (and are) readily described by many as experiences that could either be good, bad, informative, constitutive, and so forth.

A first problem that arises when immediate experiences as described above are the object of study, is their subjective status. After all, how is one supposed to study something that only the experiencers themselves are aware of? This is the problem Robert Sharf has eloquently pointed out in various of his publications.⁷ To uncritically take over an experiencer’s claims about their purported experiences could lead to unwarranted and unwanted consequences. For one, such a course of action could lead to the reification of categories of experience over time and across cultures based on perceived similarities. Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and phenomenologists of religion such as Rudolf Otto took this line of reasoning so far that they perceived religious experience to be at the core of all religions. Differences in this view were caused by culture, while similarities pointed towards a perennial truth. A different problem is that it simply cannot be verified whether a narrative based on an experience is based in any type of reality at all: after all, the issue could be based on false memories or even conscious deceit. We simply do not have direct access to the inner states of the subjects of our studies. From these problems, however, it does not follow that we cannot study the narratives about such immediate experiences. After all, the study of religion generally does not offer value judgements on super-empirical matters such as the factual existence of gods, or the literal efficacy of rituals that purport to effect unseen realities. This does not have to be any different for experience reports. However, care must be taken to put such narratives on immediate experiences in their correct context: it is important to ask the right questions of such sources.

A second problem with dealing with immediate experiences within the study of religion and esotericism is the use of the adjective ‘religious,’ ‘esoteric,’ or ‘spiritual.’ While not inherent to the title of the current work, most chapters will indeed

7 Sharf 2012.

deal with religious or spiritual experiences. In her 2009 book *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Ann Taves argues in Durkheimian fashion—with the help of ascription theory from psychology—that one should differentiate between experiences deemed religious or special on the one hand, and experiences which are not deemed religious or special on the other hand.⁸ By taking the claims of one's research subjects, a *sui generis* approach is prevented. We fully agree with Taves on this point, but at the same time want to widen our analytical scope. Taves does this by opting for 'specialness' as category which circumvents ideological biases and introduces the possibility for cross-cultural comparison by including cultures that did or do not work with the term 'religious.'⁹ While such an approach is perfectly valid, we instead choose to see 'religious' experiences as those experiences that function centrally within the framework of a chosen definition of religion. By taking a definition of religion such as Martin Riesebrodt's—"religion is a complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible"¹⁰—any experience interpreted as communication with the superhuman, as induced by the superhuman, or otherwise connected to the superhuman could be designated by researchers as a religious experience.¹¹

Our differentiation between 'religious,' 'esoteric,' and 'spiritual' is a rather pragmatic choice. The experiences dealt with in this book can usually be ascribed to either two, or even all three categories at the same time. However, in contemporary scholarship, nuances have appeared within these categories. Esotericism is often defined with reference to practices and beliefs centered around an ineffable wisdom, or seen as a group of historically marginalized traditions, studied by its own interdisciplinary field of the study of esotericism.¹² Religion and spirituality are often conceptualized—to follow the definition of Riesebrodt above—as divisible into *communal and organized* forms of practices based on the existence of superhuman powers (i.e., religion), and *individual* attempts to do the same (i.e., spirituality).¹³ While we leave open the question whether religion and spirituality are best analyti-

8 Taves 2009.

9 The perspective of Taves will be further taken up in the chapter by Maddalena Canna.

10 Riesebrodt 2010, 74–75.

11 In this sense we still follow, like Taves, an ascription model. It is, however, more top-down in the sense that the researcher's definition of religion will influence what type of experience narrative may or may not be interesting to investigate. This should be no problem: definitions serve as temporary lenses for us to focus on that which is of interest to us, we should simply be clear about what interest that is (cf. Strenski 2010).

12 Recent discussions in the study of esotericism have taken up the question on how to delineate what exactly its object of study is (e.g., Asprem and Strube 2021). Our description here is, of course, highly simplified.

13 See, e.g., Riesebrodt 2010, 77–78.

cally separated in such a way, it does point to the fact that taken together, it would be unhelpful to take a single term as an umbrella to cover all three. Stylistically, we will not be able to avoid this completely, and each author in the volume has likewise made their own decision on which concept to focus. Programmatically, however, our interest includes religious, esoteric, and spiritual phenomena and traditions in all their specific nuances—and similarly the various chapters in this book draw from a wide range of (inter)disciplinary backgrounds including the study of religion and the study of esotericism. It is our explicit wish to go beyond single disciplines to gain a wider overview of intentional transformative experiences.

Concretely operationalized, this book aims to analyze narratives of immediate experiences that are embedded in personal and cultural contexts in such a way that they are either described as religious or spiritual by the participants themselves or fit centrally within the religious or esoteric framework of their direct environment. It is from there that such immediate experiences can be put into 1) wider personal contexts such as cultivational practices (i.e., long-term experiences) and idiosyncratic reinterpretations; 2) wider societal contexts such as traditions; 3) dialogue with other branches of science in order to look for cognitive underpinnings of certain experiences; or 4) theoretical models that aim to make typologies, or that subdivide concepts into smaller analytical units.

2 Transformation

Numerous publications deal with the definition and formation of the term transformative experience, which are also decisively incorporated into the present edited volume. Among others, the works of Laurie A. Paul and Edna Ullmann-Margalit, which are briefly presented below, are of importance for this volume.

How does one (rationally) make the decision to undergo a life-changing experience of which it is unknown what the effects will be, and of which it is equally unsure how it will impact the perspective one has on oneself, or on one's life before the experience? This is the main question L.A. Paul asks in her book *Transformative Experiences*.¹⁴ For this, she first analyzes what kinds of transformations these life-changing experiences include. The examination of the types of transformation is particularly interesting for this volume, since the chapters and case studies similarly consider various differing types of transformations.

L.A. Paul's focus lies on the distinction between an epistemic transformation and a personal transformation. She understands epistemic transformative experi-

¹⁴ Paul 2014.

ences to include those kinds of transformations that follow from knowledge only accessible through the experience itself. One mundane example given is the tasting of new fruits: only through the experience is it possible to gain the knowledge of how the fruit tastes. However, L.A. Paul's initial question is dedicated to those decisions that—unlike fruit tasting—are so decisive that they can be life changing in the long term. The problem here is that it is not possible to understand what life is like afterwards without having experienced it. At the same time, the question arises as to what is missed if one decides against this very experience. An example here would be the changing of careers: one would give up a known situation for an unknown one. The core of L.A. Paul's argument is that an epistemically transformative experience involves certain knowledge that is only accessible through that experience and, for this reason, the response to it is unpredictable.

In contrast, personally transformative experiences refer to the impact that certain experiences have on the self-identification, the core values, and preferences of the experiencer. This would include, among others conversion experiences, as they alter the core preferences of the experiencer and, with it, their self-identification. Thus, a personally transformative experience changes core values as well as how individuals see themselves.

L.A. Paul is particularly interested in those experiences that contain both epistemic as well as personal transformations, because these transformative experiences can determine the future of one's life. It is here that she comes back to her starting question: the problem of how to decide for or against such a transformative experience. L.A. Paul argues that it is not possible to make a rational and informed decision in such situations because of the epistemic and personal dimensions these experiences have.¹⁵ That is to say, the combination of the change in the individual's core values, combined with the fact that the individual does not know how they will change until they are actually in the process of changing them (through having the experience).

Similarly, the question of how to rationally decide in cases with potentially transformative choices has already been raised by Edna Ullmann-Margalit.¹⁶ Like L.A. Paul, Ullmann-Margalit first narrows down the transformative decisions she

¹⁵ Of course, transformations that come with positive effects both on the epistemic as on the personal level are choices one may never regret. In their discussion of L.A. Paul's framework, Havi Carel and Ian J. Kidd point to more ambivalent experiences that may result in epistemically positive but personally negative transformation. Here, they point to cases in which a traumatic experience may come along with new insights. Other experiences may be epistemically negative but personally positive. For this, Carel and Kidd refer to religious experiences by Thomas Aquinas and Blaise Pascal. See Carel and Kidd 2020, 9.

¹⁶ Ullmann-Margalit 2017.

considers and distinguishes small decisions from big decisions—the latter being those that are personally transformative and can change one's life in a sustainable way. Next to the transformative character of such decisions or experiences, Ullmann-Margalit also identifies them as irrevocable, taken in full awareness, and as followed by a lingering shadow concerning the choice *not* made. Regarding the characteristics of transformation, she defines such choices as those that are “likely to change one's beliefs and desires (or ‘utilities’), that is, to change one's cognitive and evaluative system.”¹⁷ She also points out that there are a number of such decisions that can change life in a lasting way over a longer period of time, but Ullmann-Margalit is particularly interested in those transformations that are the result of abrupt changes or decisions.

Finally, Ullmann-Margalit makes a distinction between initially defined decisions and conversion experiences. Although conversions can also be described as life-changing, core-affecting and often irrevocable decisions, the experiencer or the decision-maker may take a different stance. Ullmann-Margalit mentions two aspects here: 1) the situation is often not identified as a decision by the decision-maker and 2) the previous life is often rated negatively by the decision-maker. From an outside perspective, a conversion can be perceived as a big decision, but the person who made the decision or experienced it perceives it differently.

Going beyond this introductory summary, Ullmann-Margalit's distinction between “old person” and “new person” is particularly relevant for this volume. In big decisions “the personality-transforming opting situation is one in which the old ‘rationality base’ is replaced by a new,”¹⁸ which will almost necessarily result in the following: after the decision that implies a transformative experience, reasons and intentions change in retrospect. Significant to our topic, Ullmann-Margalit demonstrates this complex situation with the example of “a high-tech executive who, craving spirituality, considers opting for a life as a Buddhist monk.” The executive longs for some perceived important characteristics of Buddhism, such as simplicity and peace, and tries to gather as much information as he can about a possible change to Buddhism for making the decision. Most likely, the Buddhist monk will be transformed in a way that makes it difficult for him to evaluate rationally whether the whole transformative process conforms to that what the “old person” originally had in mind. However, this example also shows that “converting” to become a monk will usually be a complex process of path-dependent decisions and not just a “grand transformative experience”—it might equally be a series of smaller life-altering experiences, that change the course of life. In this regard, philosophers Carel and Kidd

¹⁷ Ullmann-Margalit 2017, 69.

¹⁸ Ullmann-Margalit 2017, 75.

argue convincingly that many transformative experiences may unfold gradually and arise cumulatively over the course of a longer period.¹⁹

In the field of spirituality, such major epistemically transformative experiences may result in adopting a “cosmic” perspective on the world, becoming aware of one’s innate nature of supra-individual consciousness, or the like. However, both Ullmann-Margalit and L.A. Paul look at such transformative experiences from decision theory and ask whether a person has sufficient knowledge to decide what a certain decision—for example, to take a potent psychedelic drug—will mean to them. In sum, “epistemically transformative experiences” will result in a largely incommensurable and unforeseeable state: one may in principle never know before but only by actually experiencing it what such a major transformative experience will yield for the individual.

The works of L.A. Paul and Ullmann-Margalit present tools for further considerations—with regard to the communication and repeatability of such transformative experiences as well as the duration or processual nature of these. Their terms can be used to more specifically question what types of transformations we are dealing with, and they can serve as heuristic tools for comparing the statements of the experiencers about the effects of their transformations.

3 Intentionality and Self-Cultivation

The last term that will be emphasized in connection with transformative experiences is ‘intentionality.’ This element will further down be discussed in its connection to self-cultivation. For our purpose, we can define the characteristics of being “intentional” in these experiences as either their quality of being intentionally transformative or the fact that experiences are sought out by the practitioners. Respective individuals have developed a certain mental state—a desire, a will, or a wish—to undergo such a transformative experience, or even a succession of such experiences. To achieve this, individuals follow purposeful behavior which they believe should enable exceptional experiences. These experiences therefore emerge neither involuntary nor nonvoluntary.²⁰

¹⁹ Carel and Kidd 2020.

²⁰ See Paul 2014, 16; Carel and Kidd 2020, 3; 7–9. For nonvoluntary transformative experiences, that one would never chose deliberately, Carel and Kidd refer to the case of Primo Levi, surviving a concentration camp, evaluating it in part as an experience that made his post-experiential life ‘richer,’ whereas involuntary experiences are instinctively chosen, that is, devoid of deliberation: “transformed, but through an unintended consequence of a choice” (Carel and Kidd, 2020, 8).

But how can such major transformative experiences in the spiritual realm be intentionally sought, and how do those experiences bring about transformative change? Paradigmatic are those experiences that result from spiritual practices.²¹ Here a bridge can be made to the concept of self-cultivation as discussed by Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault. Questions about actions or ways of life aimed at a specific transformative experience have been addressed early in different cultures and periods. Hadot, for example, argued that within Hellenistic and Roman philosophical, as well as medieval Christian traditions, practice was not only aimed at reflection of the world. Instead, these traditions understood the aim of a philosophical life as actively exercising spiritual practices. For that matter, he defined the spiritual practices as “voluntary, personal practices intended to cause a transformation of the self.”²² Already earlier, Michel Foucault had developed his concept of “care of the self,” again from Hellenistic and Roman philosophers, arguing that its purpose is to transform the self, namely, to “change, purify, transform, and transfigure oneself.”²³ For Foucault, spiritual practices are essentially somatic since the focus of such depictions is often on embodied practice that can be described with Foucault’s notion as ‘technologies of the self.’ These technologies consist of techniques that allow individuals to affect “a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, or to attain a certain state of perfection.”²⁴ Foucault distinguished between Greek and Roman Stoic technologies of the self as transforming the self, whereas, he argued, Christian hermeneutic technologies of the self (e.g., as meditation, self-examination, or confession) aim at a renunciation *from* the self, as ‘conscience-vivisection,’ popularized in the Reformation, and transmitted into modernity as the goal to (merely) ‘know oneself.’²⁵ In sum, both Hadot and Foucault share an interest in life-long practices of philosophical schools as ongoing self-cultivation²⁶ but are less interested in a typology of the respective transformative experiences. Nor did they engage with the prevalence of intentional transformative

21 See Hadot 2002.

22 Hadot 2011, 87; cf. Hadot 2020, 36; Hadot 1995, 79–125.

23 Foucault 2005.

24 Foucault 2016.

25 Cf. Foucault 2016, 110.

26 Hadot says that these philosophical schools “imposed a way of life on its members, a way of life which engaged the whole of one’s existence,” consisting of “spiritual exercises,” that is, “practices that aimed at a modification, an improvement and a transformation of the self.” Interestingly, Hadot emphasizes the “act of choice,” the “fundamental option for a certain way of life.” In regard to practices, Hadot explains that most engage in “inner discourse” and “spiritual activity,” that is, “in meditation, dialogue with oneself, examination of conscience or exercises of imagination such as the view from above on the cosmos or the earth” (Hadot 2020, 35–36).

experiences as portrayed and discussed in Asian traditions or contemporary global culture. Nevertheless, their reflections form a helpful foundation for the present consideration of the terms intentionality and self-cultivation in connection with transformative experiences.

Intentionality therefore seems often to be intrinsically wound up—at least within the domains of religion, spirituality, and esotericism—with the concept of practice. This adds an extra dimension to a transformative experience being intentional. No longer is it a question of making a choice, instead, there is an additional question on how to prepare for the sought-after experience. As practices to attain transformation might span periods of time ranging from months to years, additional analytical problems appear. First, the fact that the experiences are often embedded within religious traditions, might shape the pre-experiential expectations and post-experiential reflections of the narrators under investigation. Second, the fact that post-hoc narratives are often the only sources we have on the experience, it becomes hard to reconstruct the original intentions the experiencers had pursuing the transformation in the first place. When properly taken into account, however, the problems raised above can be used to enhance our analysis of specific instances of intentional transformative experiences.

4 Earlier Literature on Transformative Experiences

The concept of transformative or transformational experiences has in the last decade been discussed interdisciplinary from perspectives as diverse as philosophy,²⁷ various branches of psychology,²⁸ anthropology,²⁹ and neuroscience.³⁰ An extensive literature overview would exceed the scope of this introduction, so instead certain themes that have been raised earlier will be picked up here, in order to delineate what has been done, and in what ways the authors of this volume will expand on this.

A recent attempt to provide a definition of transformative experience that aims at integrating the disciplinary perspectives mentioned above has been made by Alice Chirico and colleagues. It reads:

²⁷ Paul 2015; Carel and Kidd 2020.

²⁸ White 2004; Miller and C'de Baca 2001.

²⁹ Van Gennep 1908; Turner 1947.

³⁰ Brouwer and Carhart-Harris 2020.

Transformative experiences can be defined as brief experiences, perceived as extraordinary and unique, entailing durable and/or irreversible outcomes, which contribute to changing individuals' self-conception, worldviews, and view of others, as well as their own personality and identity by involving an epistemic expansion [. . .] and a heightened emotional complexity [. . .] as the two core phenomenological features. They are usually remembered vividly.³¹

The definition given clearly includes L.A. Paul's epistemic and personal transformations and adds several additional elements, such as a definition of experience close to what we have called 'immediate experience' above, the irreversibility of the transformation, and the vivid recollection of the whole. As will be seen further below, this working definition fits most experiences in the current collection. Yet the authors will bring unique perspectives to the concept that promise to enrich our interdisciplinary perspective of it.

Much literature on the topic of transformative experiences has been on the question of how one should make the choice to have possibly transformative experiences or not, as in the case of L.A. Paul,³² Ullmann-Margalit,³³ Lambert and Schwenkler³⁴ as well as Pettigrew.³⁵ Other literature has pointed out the necessity to include experiences that are unintentional, such as Carel and Kidd.³⁶ Further questions have been raised regarding the added epistemological and evidential value: will such experiences bring about new insights into reality, or help to bring forth volitional changes of personality or personality traits?³⁷ Summarized, philosophical and psychological works ask what the personal gain of experiences deemed transformative will be, and how individuals should actively aim for such experiences, and whether they even can.

The authors of the current volume deal with intentional transformative experiences that are part of a broader discourse on experiences of spiritual transformation. They are either interested in the transformative qualities attributed to those experiences in autobiographical reports, or in the embodied practices themselves, which are present in many religious traditions: for example, fasting, meditation, systematic self-observation, ingestion of psychoactive substances, pilgrimage, and so forth. As the diversity of such potentially transformative practices shows, both terms, 'experience' and 'transformation,' can assume various meanings. For example, it can refer to both a very short experiential event such as a near-death experience, or a week-

³¹ Chirico et al. 2022, 14.

³² Paul 2014.

³³ Ullman-Margalit 2017.

³⁴ Lambert and Schwenkler 2020.

³⁵ Pettigrew 2015.

³⁶ Carel and Kidd 2019.

³⁷ Hudson and Fraley 2017.

long fasting. The same holds true for transformation. With transformation, an individual may address a fundamental change, a revolution of the basis of the person, while others just wish to express that their lives take a new turn.

By limiting the scope to religious, spiritual, or esoteric practices, conceptualization of intentionally sought transformative experiences will be enhanced. Two underemphasized aspects within literature on transformative experiences have been 1) a historical contextualization of these experiences, and 2) a perspective that takes into account the heterogeneity of experiences that can be deemed transformative. Studies on religion, spirituality, and esotericism are situated better than most disciplines to capture the various practices that have been performed and experiences allegedly lived through in the search for transformation in their full context. By broadening the scope historically—including the nineteenth and twentieth century—as well geographically—including South Asia—insights from new cases can point to theoretical reflections that have implications for the concept of ‘(intentional) transformative experiences.’ On the one hand, assumptions that are uniquely contemporary and Western might be amended, while on the other hand aspects that were more prominent in other times and areas might be uncovered.

5 Central Themes and Relations between Chapters

The volume’s main contribution to the study of intentional transformative experience will be 1) to focus primarily on religious and esoteric practices from the nineteenth century onwards; and 2) to introduce a multifaceted theoretical and thematic approach to the phenomenon that is based primarily within the study of religion and esotericism. In order to highlight the underlying processes involved in such practices, the chapters will take important religious and esoteric case studies and analyze them from new perspectives. Below, the main themes and their case studies are sketched. The themes range from contextualization on the macro level, by embedding transformative experiences within cognitive terms, to the mesolevel of societal and cultural factors, all the way to the micro level, where the particular lives of experiencers are analyzed closely. A last theme deals more conceptually with central aspects of intentional transformative experiences that have so far not received much attention. Taken together, the themes show how any intentional transformative experience can be tied to biological constants, societal constraints, and personal idiosyncrasies—and how any such experience has the potential to teach us more about the general concept as a whole.

5.1 The Cognition of Intentional Transformative Experiences

Multiple contributions in the volume use cognitive theories to better understand how experiences can intentionally be induced in and interpreted by would-be experiencers. These approaches give a strong impetus to look carefully into the bodily and psychological bases of transformative experiences and how they are induced by practitioners. A cognitive approach has the potential to bridge the life-world of the experiencer with the analytical view of the academic, without succumbing to a naïve understanding of transformative experiences as perennial. A careful consideration of cognition and embodiment allows to move beyond questions of authenticity and into an area of tentative and educated speculation on the phenomenology and neurocognitive background of described experiences. Although such approaches by themselves will not allow the study of transformative experiences to go beyond its primary source of narratives, they can form an additional interpretative framework on which analyses can build.³⁸

The work of Keith Cantú (chapter 2) provides an interesting example of the use of cognitive theories in the context of intentional transformative experiences. He takes the case study of Sri Sabhapati Swami's (1828–1923/4) flight to the celestial mountain Kailāsa as a starting point for an investigation of the responses to such extraordinary experiences by European, American, as well as South Asian authors who questioned the validity of these accounts. Specifically, Cantú presents the communications and critical considerations of the leading members of the Theosophical Society about the alleged flight. He then turns towards the cognitive science of religion to look for a more sympathetic reading than the critical disapproval Sabhapati received before, yet more critical than taking the experience at face value. Instead, Cantú takes his cue from the developments within the study of human perception. Using the notion of decontextualized processing, he shows how Sabhapati's training might have consisted in overriding the default mode network of the brain, through which the flight to the celestial mountain could have been perceived as real. By raising this as an alternative explanation, Cantú consciously attempts to go beyond a Western common-sense notion that transformative experiences such as Sabhapati's must rest on rationality-based belief in their veracity. Instead, the interpretation of the event should be seen as based in the (cognitively enhanced) nature of the personal experience, rather than as a simple question of dogmatic belief.

The second chapter in the cognitive section, by Flavio Geisshüsler, deals with meditation practices of “Direct Transcendence,” which primarily emerged from

³⁸ See for earlier attempts to cognitively situate religious experiences Asprem and Taves (2017), as well as Asprem (2017).

Tibetan Buddhism (chapter 3). Geisshüsler is particularly interested in the visionary experiences that should emerge from such an intentional practice of meditation. Such visions include a crescendo of spectacular images starting from small dots which change to lassos, eventually culminating into a vision of a hundred buddhas in their celestial abodes. Direct Transcendence occurs in settings of sensory deprivation and are said by the tradition's texts to occur from a sense of 'naked perception,' or a non-judgmental attitude—they happen spontaneously and unintentionally. Geisshüsler instead turns to cognitive research on perception to question just how non-intentional such visions can be, utilizing enactive cognition and perceptual activity theory. He shows that between the strong expectations of how such a visually-based experience should unfold, and the constructive nature of perception—which is shaped not passively by outside stimuli only, but rather created as much through the brain—it would be hard to speak of non-intentionality.³⁹ Rather, Geisshüsler shows how to be at once accommodating to the experiencers' claims of grandiose visions while staying critical at how such visions could cognitively occur.

The section is closed by the chapter of Maddalena Canna (chapter 4), who takes the theories of Tanya Luhrmann, Rebecca Seligman, and Ann Taves as a starting point to compare them and to show their potentials and limits in connection with analyzing intentional transformative experiences. From Luhrmann and Taves she takes the notion that religious or transformative experiences are formed of a cognitive and a cultural component; combined these components lead to the interpretation by experiencers that they had an encounter with the extraordinary. From Seligman, Canna takes the idea that also the counterpart of the previous, what Canna calls an estrangement from the ordinary, can take place: as experiencers look back at their lives prior to the event, they distance themselves from their previous 'normality' which is then considered to be abnormal instead. Canna integrates this new notion into the componential approaches of Taves and Luhrmann to come to a more complete understanding of how religious and transformative changes are experienced and evaluated by the practitioners who said to have had them. She adds empirical evidence for her theoretical addition through her own case study of contemporary Advaita Vedānta as practiced in this case in a European ashram. Canna shows that there is much to learn from approaching extraordinary events from the opposite angle instead.

39 In this sense, the chapter of Geisshüsler is complemented by the later chapter of Karl Baier, who argues that there often is a non-intentional factor to otherwise intentionally sought experiences.

5.2 The Sociological Contexts of Intentional Transformative Experiences

Two chapters of the volume focus on the sociological contexts of specific practitioners or traditions to better understand the cultural background of certain transformative experiences. The nineteenth and twentieth century saw sweeping changes to both the West and South Asia. New understandings of the self, consciousness, and religion were being formed through mutual exchanges that were informed by contexts of colonialism and a professionalization of science. Practices from old traditions had to be reinvented in light of these changes or were adopted by thinkers from complete different cultural backgrounds. Change, therefore, was the rule, rather than the exception. The chapters discussed within this theme will show exactly how specific intentional transformative experiences were swept along in larger societal and cultural reconfigurations—and how they have been transformed in the process. These chapters therefore show that intentional transformative experiences—and even how we as academics conceptualize the term itself—can only be understood when read against their cultural backgrounds, simultaneously giving meaningful tools for further studies into similar phenomena.

The section opens with a chapter by Joseph Azize and Steven Sutcliffe on G.I. Gurdjieff (1866?–1949) and the spiritual movement he led (chapter 5). They show in great detail the types of exercise Gurdjieff believed were necessary to awaken the self. More than any other chapter in the volume, the effort behind the attainment of a transformative experience is described, as Gurdjieff believed only thousands of exercises would result in success. The practices are shown to include many proprioceptive elements, and the objective of complete awareness of one's actions and thoughts through painstaking repetition. Yet Azize and Sutcliffe go beyond showing just how Gurdjieff and his followers believed they could reach their goals. Additionally, they situate the movement in the twentieth century spiritual seekership culture, in which many participants sought out new methods to satisfy their religious needs. Gurdjieff's approach is shown to fit within such a culture, but to differ from some of its aspects as well. In doing so, Azize and Sutcliffe demonstrate the importance of analyzing the specifics of singular persons and movements within the wider context in which they were embedded. Their work sheds new light not just on the Gurdjieff movement, but on the religious landscape of the twentieth century as well.

The second and final chapter of the sociological section is by Magdalena Kraler, who investigates the instructional texts on yogic breath control, or *prāṇāyāma*, which promise to induce transformative experiences ranging from this-worldly health effects to liberation from the cycle of rebirth (chapter 6). Kraler shows how

the ancient practice was transformed in the nineteenth and twentieth century and analyzes two of the biggest changes. First, in the late nineteenth century, in the shadow of colonialism, South Asian writers started to legitimize the practice through science, conceptualizing *prāṇāyāma* as an empirical—and therefore experimental—science. As a result, however, the description of subjective experience was much less prominent than the observable and predictable results the practice should have. On the other hand, the hygienic self-culture movement is shown to have likewise changed the practice of *prāṇāyāma*, albeit in a different direction. There, the resulting subjective, transformative experiences were once again highlighted in order to pursue open-ended self-development. While there are clear differences in the two movements, Kraler closes by showing the interdependence of the two contexts of science and self-culture. The personal experience of the practitioner cannot be completely disregarded, even in the context of scientific legitimization, whereas the main protagonists of the hygienic movement always saw the need to prove their claims and practices in order to gain recognition within the field. The tension between objective and subjective value might very well be present in many other cases of intentional transformative experiences.⁴⁰

5.3 The Personal Contexts of Intentional Transformative Experiences

Even though individuals are to a certain extent constrained by their surroundings, there is a capacity for substantial agency of single persons as well. The chapters of this section show through their analyses of single author-practitioners that the specific contexts, ideas, and actions of certain individuals can lead them to innovative ideas—even if not all these ideas become influential. Through proper historical contextualization, the authors of these chapters show how there is always a dialogue between the cultural heritage of (would-be) experiencers, and the outcome of their idiosyncratic interpretations of practice, transformation, and experience. It is in the micro-history of such individuals, that themes central to intentionality, transformation, and experience become identifiable, and may be once again operationalized on a conceptual level to further amend the way we use such terms.

This section opens with the chapter by Wouter Hanegraaff, who takes the hermetic writer Mary Anne Atwood (1817–1910) as a case study to investigate her approach to the transformative experience of hermetic rebirth (chapter 7). In par-

⁴⁰ See for example the chapter of Bastiaan van Rijn, which shows similar tendencies in a case study of roughly the same timeframe.

ticular, Hanegraaff analyzes Atwood's contribution to *Early Animal Magnetism* and her *Suggestive Inquiry* to supplement earlier work on the author. Specifically, the indebtedness of Atwood's ideas to the Hermetic literature from late antiquity is emphasized: even though Atwood started from a spiritual alchemical basis, Hanegraaff shows that we see in her work a remarkable understanding of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Particularly relevant to this volume is Hanegraaff's focus on the transformative practices Atwood believed would lead to a hermetic rebirth, as well as the transmission of the knowledge. The case shows the quest of Atwood to decipher the correct practices to gain hidden knowledge through animal magnetism, alchemy, and potentially spiritual procreation, as well as her endeavors to hide her findings within her books. Only diligent, and therefore worthy, readers could uncover just what Atwood discussed. Hanegraaff demonstrates that thorough investigation of single authors can bring a wealth of information about particular instances of searches for intentional transformative experiences.

The following chapter by Marleen Thaler deals with the kuṇḍalinī awakening of Gopi Krishna (1903–1984) and its effects (chapter 8). Thaler describes how the experience strongly influenced Krishna, and how he went beyond a religious explanation of kuṇḍalinī to instead embrace a science-based understanding of the energy concept in question. In doing so, Krishna opened the practice up for a non-Indian audience eager to adopt Indian spiritual phenomena and adapt them according to their own cultural interests. In a further step, Thaler underlines the influence of Krishna's experiences and framing of kuṇḍalinī on subsequent experience reports among non-Indians. Of special interest to the volume is the negotiation of religious and scientific terminology. Thaler shows how Krishna's understanding of kuṇḍalinī involved not only the potential for individual transformative experiences, but also the root of a spiritual evolution: according to Krishna, the acceptance and experience of the biological mechanisms behind kuṇḍalinī might underpin the emergence of a universal religion and thereby align humanity with its spiritual-evolutionary path. The case study lays bare the entanglement between intentionally sought personally transformative experiences, and the oft-found wish to use such experiences to transform societies, or even the whole of humanity.

Finally, Bastiaan van Rijn's chapter builds a typology for intentional transformative experiences by taking up L.A. Paul's scheme and expanding it with features that emerge from the case study of the French animal magnetizer Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet (1809–1885) (chapter 9). Van Rijn shows how Cahagnet's work initially focused on intentionally inducing transformative experiences in magnetic somnambulists to gain knowledge about life after death. Later on, however, Cahagnet instead took to hashish to cut out the intermediaries and have himself and others directly experience what the afterlife is like. In the end, Cahagnet mostly returned to his somnambulist-based research due to the fact that hashish was harder to use

for his scientific purposes. The two approaches to gain scientific proof of an afterlife through the practices, illustrated by Cahagnet, are used by Van Rijn to further divide the concept of intentional transformative experience into the terms of ‘intentionally induced self-transformative experiences’ and ‘intentionally induced states of knowledge.’ These two sub-categories point to different goals and methods of such phenomena, such as the self-transformation of the experiencers or the transformation of others. Both terms can be used to better understand the concept of intentional transformative experience and to make it more operationalized for future analyses.

5.4 The Conceptual Aspects of Intentional Transformative Experiences

Various authors of the volume look at specific sub parts of intentional transformative experiences to better understand the whole. The chapters within this section expand the analytical language of transformative experiences and provide useful tools for investigation of such phenomena. Case studies in this section are chosen, not only because they contain interesting examples of intentional transformative experiences, but because they shed light on undertheorized aspects of the very concept itself. Such conceptual analyses combine the historical specificity of their direct subjects, with the addition of a more abstract theoretical depth. These chapters thereby create the potential to see other instances of intentional transformative experiences from new perspectives, as well as to reconceptualize our terminology as a whole.

Karl Baier opens the section by investigating the relationship between intentionality and non-intentionality within transformative experiences (chapter 10). He analyzes the role ‘active imagination’ played in the work of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Baier shows that while Jung’s open-ended journey contained intentional elements, for example through the building of a miniature city, it was exactly the uncontrolled subjective experiences that followed which brought with them a transformative quality: one’s imagination should actively and purposefully be followed to unconscious contents, which in turn has to be interpreted and expressed. The essential role of the unintended, through the unconscious, is thereby put into the forefront. The chapter further chronicles the reception of Jung’s active imagination by later generations of psychologists and juxtaposes Jung’s conceptions on active imagination with those of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) on will-directed thought and non-willing. Ultimately, for Baier, Jung is an exemplar of how intentional transformative experiences often obtain their actual value through the unpredictable and likewise unintentional aspects. The unconscious is but one instance of the unintentional powers

that can be sought by practitioners. Conceptually, Baier sets forth an intriguing, seemingly paradoxical, notion that deserves attention: that to intentionally seek transformative experiences, is often to intentionally seek the unintentional.

The chapter by Jens Schlieter likewise deals with the core aspects of the volume (chapter 11). Drawing on various works that are crucial for the analysis of intentional transformative experiences, such as L.A. Paul, Taves, and Wierzbicka, he argues for the relevance of religiosity for the understanding of what is it that makes experiences life changing. His thesis is that an understanding of the finite, mortal existence as (actually) ultimately infinite, immortal or part of a meaningful whole constitutes the quintessential transformative experience. According to Schlieter, only such experiences can be understood as truly transformative and life changing. Schlieter furthermore argues that such experiences should always be framed in an autobiographical background, which integrates them into a long line of earlier autobiographical experiences. Using various case studies, he shows how intentionality and a pre-existing expectation of the transformation often play a crucial role in the evaluation of potentially transformative experiences. From this he concludes that even religious experiences—often believed to be instantaneous and unintentional—can always be traced back to an individual's biography. Schlieter therefore argues that transformative experiences in this regard should be seen as resulting from accumulated knowledge (throughout one's life) rather than being singular, one-time extraordinary events.

Concluding the section, Sarah Perez takes up the issue of how one can analyze intentional transformative experiences in the first place (chapter 12). Her case study is the contemporary phenomenon of 'reality shifting,' in which mostly young adults actively try to temporarily or permanently enter a different, often highly pre-determined reality. Perez shows that it is fruitful to divide the experience narratives of practitioners into smaller subsections: in her case how one prepares to shift, how the initial shift is experienced, what life is like in the other reality, and how the experience is evaluated afterwards. This way, immediate experiences are combined with long-term experiences into one conceptual framework. The identification of multiple stages allows Perez to more precisely handle analytical concepts such as those offered by L.A. Paul. This way, it becomes easier to identify what kind of change is said to happen at what point, and the structure of the phenomenon is laid bare. For example, reality shifting seems to get its personal transformative elements mostly from the preparatory, and evaluative stage, rather than through the experience—as the latter is mostly the fulfilment of the shifters' wishes. The experience, on the other hand, offers the epistemic certainty without which one could not have spoken of a transformative experience. The chapter shows that there is much to gain from a close analytical gaze.

The four themes—cognitive, sociological, personal, and conceptual—all work together to give complementary views of how intentionally transformative experiences can fruitfully be investigated. Together, they link social and contextual factors to deeper biological and cognitive ones, while providing analytical tools to investigate the sub processes of such experiences. By looking at all these levels, a deeper understanding of specific instances of transformative experience as well as the category itself can be achieved. Each chapter does not only add new perspectives on a specific case study from the history of religion, spirituality, or esotericism, but also allows for new insights on how to analyze similar intentional transformative experiences. The contributions to this volume show the strengths inherent in each single approach. Yet put together, they demonstrate what is to be gained when analyses of themes such as intentional transformative experiences combine different perspectives.

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