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utopraxis@luz.ve

Universidad del Zulia

Venezuela

CURNOW, Trevor

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## ARTÍCULOS

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## Metamorphoses *Metamorfosis*

**Trevor CURNOW**

*University of Cumbria, England.*

### Resumen

Nuestras vidas pueden ser transformadas por nuestras experiencias de muy diversas formas. A veces, una experiencia es tan poderosa que nos hace ver el mundo de una forma totalmente nueva; sin embargo, ver el mundo diferente no implica necesariamente verlo mejor. Quizás no seamos capaces de afrontar una experiencia, pero eso no significa que, en ese caso, no hayamos extraído de ella la lección apropiada. En estos casos, es preciso distinguir entre su fuerza psicológica y su peso epistémico.

**Palabras clave:** de-tradicionalización; hesychasm; misterios; reencuadre.

### Abstract

Our lives can be transformed by our experiences in many different ways. Sometimes an experience is so powerful that it makes us see the world in a completely different way. However, seeing the world differently is not necessarily the same as seeing the world better. We may not be able to resist an experience, but that does not mean that we learn the correct lesson from it. It is necessary to distinguish psychological force from epistemological weight.

**Keywords:** de-traditionalization; hesychasm; mysteries; reframing.

## INTRODUCTION

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect”<sup>1</sup>. So begins one of the most famous short stories of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’. Gregor Samsa had not sought to become an insect, and it took some time for him to understand how he had changed and how his relationship to the world had changed. In *physical* terms, he finds that he has a very different body. His new body has different abilities from his previous human one, and he needs to re-learn how he can move around and physically interact with the world in which he finds himself. In *psychological* terms, there is no such discontinuity. His mental capacities and memories remain intact, his ideas, opinions and beliefs have not changed. His basic outlook on the world, at least at the time when he wakes up, is as before. In one sense everything is familiar, but in another sense everything has changed.

Although the specific details of Kafka’s story clearly belong to the world of fiction, the basic structure of the story has many parallels in the world of fact. We know that for thousands of years people’s lives have been transformed by experiences of various kinds. We know that these experiences can make people feel that in one sense everything is familiar, but in another sense everything has changed. Sometimes, as in Gregor Samsa’s case, these experiences come wholly unexpectedly and have not been sought in any way. Sometimes people consciously seek them and do all they can to make them happen. However, a big difference between fact and fiction is that whereas in ‘Metamorphosis’ Gregor Samsa was physically transformed, in the real world changes usually take place in other ways. *Because* he was physically transformed, it was relatively easy for Gregor Samsa to understand what had happened to him (even if he did not know why). In the real world it is often difficult to understand what has happened, let alone what it means.

## CONVERSION

The events within a fictional narrative unfold within a context determined and controlled by the author. In the real world there is usually much more uncertainty and ambiguity. One of the most dramatic historical accounts of someone’s life being drastically transformed can be found in *The Bible*. Despite its great significance for the history of Christianity, the account given there of the conversion of St Paul is very short.

While he was still on the road and nearing Damascus, suddenly a light flashed from the sky all around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Tell me, Lord,’ he said, ‘who you are.’ The voice answered, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you have to do.’ Meanwhile the men who were travelling with him stood speechless; they heard the voice, but could see no one. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could not see<sup>2</sup>.

There are two obvious similarities here to Kafka’s story. First, what happens to Saul happens totally unexpectedly, and, secondly, there is a physical transformation (if only a partial and temporary one), in that Saul becomes blind.

Looking at this brief narrative objectively, the following points may be noted. First, it is not clear what Saul’s companions have seen. Is the light real or not? Only Saul falls to the ground because of the light, which suggests that only Saul saw it. This makes the status and nature of the light problematic. Could he have been imagining it? Secondly, Saul does not initially understand what he hears, and so has to interrogate the voice.

1 KAFKA, F (1961). *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, Penguin, Harmondsworth, p. 9.

2 Acts of the Apostles. Chapter: 9, verses 3-8 (*New English Bible* translation).

Thirdly, he is then given a very explicit message concerning what to do next. Without this brief discussion, how would he have understood what had happened to him, and what would he have done next? The initial experience is clearly a powerful one, but it is far from clear what impact the initial experience alone would have had on Saul.

Much has been made of the fact that Saul went from being a persecutor of Christianity to being its most fervent apostle. On the face of it, this is a total and drastic transformation. However, there is more than one way of looking at what happened. Saul was a *fervent* persecutor of Christianity, and so to some extent obsessed with it. It is not unknown for people who are very much in favour of something to become very much against it, without going through all of the intermediate positions. The Greek word for 'conversion' is *metanoia*, which has the fundamental meaning of a change of mind, and Saul's mind was clearly *on* Christianity, but then his position on it changed. Had he been indifferent to Christianity, or never heard of it, his conversion to it might have been much more miraculous. It is possible to understand the conversion of St Paul as not only something that happened to him, but also as something for which he was ready. As individuals with our own characters and histories, we bring our own contexts to whatever we experience, our own interpretive backgrounds. If the experience is the text, we are the context. Not everyone is equally receptive to the same experience, not everyone takes the same lesson from it.

## THE MYSTERIES

I turn now to a very different kind of phenomenon. Before, during and after the life of St Paul the ancient world was host to a number of movements known collectively as the Mysteries. If the life-changing experience of Saul was to some extent a very individual occurrence, then the Mysteries were there to deliver life-changing experiences on a far larger scale. However, exactly what they delivered is a matter of some uncertainty and controversy.

It is difficult and dangerous to generalise about the Mysteries, because we have very little reliable knowledge about them. What can be said is that they always seem to have functioned as adjuncts of a cult, and that a number of different cults had their own Mysteries. Although the origins of the earliest ones probably stretch back to the second millennium BC, they achieved their greatest popularity during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Cults with Mysteries attached to them during this time included those of Mithras (originally from Persia) and Isis (originally from Egypt), with cult centres in many different places. But perhaps the most prestigious of all were the Mysteries associated with the cult of Demeter and Persephone that were celebrated at Eleusis, near Athens.

The Mysteries were like cults within cults. Admission to them was restricted, and not all who sought admission were granted it. Those who were selected had to go through an initiation ritual. This typically included vows of secrecy, which were almost always kept. This is one of the main reasons why our knowledge of the Mysteries is so limited. Nevertheless, enough evidence has survived to be able to have at least a general idea of how they functioned, even if they did not all function in exactly the same way.

Before initiation it was necessary to go through a period and process of preparation. This would typically involve fasting and the observance of various dietary restrictions, as well as an abstinence from any sexual activity. Ritual bathing and purifications were also common. Although the initiation ceremony itself was private and secret, the hours preceding the ceremony might involve very public processions and celebrations. All this helped to put those who were about to be initiated into a particular frame of mind and state of expectation.

The initiation ceremony at Eleusis involved three elements known as *legomena*, *deikynema* and *dromena*<sup>3</sup>. The *legomena* were things that were said, the *deikynema* were things that were shown, and the

3 MEYER, MW (Ed) (1987). *The Ancient Mysteries: a sourcebook*. Harper & Row, San Francisco, p. 10.

*dromena* were things that were done. Whatever the precise content of these three elements, it is clear that the initiate, having been suitably prepared, was led through a carefully controlled ritual that was intended to have a calculated effect. But what effect?

Whether it succeeded or not, the initiate was meant to be transformed by the experience and in a sense be 'born again' into a new understanding of the world. In the *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius of Madaura there is a passage that suggests at least part of what someone initiated into the Mysteries of the cult of Isis might have experienced:

I approached the very gates of death and set one foot on Proserpina's threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining as if it were noon; I entered the presence of the gods of the under-world and the gods of the upper-world, stood near and worshipped them<sup>4</sup>.

From the experience might emerge a new understanding of life and death, and of the relationship between the gods and humanity. As Cicero, who was initiated at Eleusis, put it, the Mysteries taught "how to live in happiness and how to die with a better hope"<sup>5</sup>. If that was the effect of initiation, then it was clearly an experience that significantly transformed how people saw the world around them.

Not everyone derived the same benefit from initiation, but not everyone approached the experience in the same way. "Some people sought initiation because they were lonely, alienated, or bored, and they wished to become members of a close-knit social group"<sup>6</sup>. However, for those who sought, and were open to, a more spiritual kind of reward, the psychological changes and benefits might be very significant.

In the Mysteries, very little was left to chance, and it was clearly expected that initiates would take a particular lesson away from their experience. We do not know exactly what they were told, or shown, or did, but there seems little doubt that they were firmly guided into having a particular kind of experience and interpreting it in a particular kind of way. Without that structure around it, it is not clear what initiates would have learnt from their experience.

## HESYCHASM

The Mysteries receded in the face of the Christianity that St Paul helped to advance. To some extent it took over their role in offering people a vision of a life beyond death and a more spiritual form of religiosity than that offered by the traditional civic cults of Greece and Rome. The development of a mystical tradition within Christianity was shaped in part by the philosophy of Plato, as refashioned by Plotinus, which helped to provide a kind of metaphysical map of the terrain in which the soul might travel. However, even with the best of maps it is possible to get lost, and a number of disputes arose within the history of Christian mysticism concerning the nature and meaning of mystical experience.

The particular dispute I want to look at here was known as the Hesychast controversy, and had its origins in the Orthodox monasteries of Mount Athos. During the fourteenth century, the practice of the Jesus Prayer (sometimes known as the prayer of the heart) became widely established there. The practice involves the repetition of a short prayer over and over again. As a result of doing this, some monks found themselves having a number of experiences. In particular, they had visions of a kind of light. This gave rise to questions concerning exactly what those experiences *were* and exactly what those experiences *meant*. In particular, monks wanted to clarify the relationship between the light they saw and God.

4 APULEIUS (1950). *The Golden Ass*. Trans. Robert Graves, Penguin, Harmondsworth, p. 26.

5 TRIPOLITIS, A (2002). *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p. 21

6 MEYER, MW (Ed) (1987). *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

Opposing views consolidated around two theologians of the time, Barlaam the Calabrian and Gregory Palamas. Barlaam's principal point was this: "Since direct experience of God is not possible in this life, it follows that the light which the Hesychasts claim to see with their bodily eyes cannot be the uncreated light of the Godhead; it must be a physical and created light". It is important to note that Barlaam's position is a theological one. Whatever Hesychasts *may* see (and he does not doubt that they really do see *something*), it *cannot* be 'the uncreated light of the Godhead' because that is theologically impermissible and impossible. If they *cannot* see it then it clearly follows that they *do* not see it.

As can happen in major disputes, in some ways the two sides were not so far apart. Palamas agreed with Barlaam that direct experience of God was not possible, *if* by 'God' we mean 'God's essence'. However, he drew a distinction between God's *essence* and God's *energies*, and insisted that we *could* have direct experience of the latter. Whereas God's essence constitutes God as *being*, God's energies are God *acting*. He believed that the light that the Hesychasts saw was the uncreated light of God's energies. The view of Palamas became the official one, approved and endorsed at councils held in Constantinople in 1347 and 1351. His account of the light perceived by the Hesychasts became the acceptable interpretation of what they saw.

Barlaam and Palamas both accepted that the Hesychasts had an experience of light, but they disagreed on the nature of the light, and therefore what it signified. Barlaam did not condemn Hesychasm as such, but he thought that practitioners of it were making inflated claims for their experiences, misunderstanding the nature of the light they saw and so misinterpreting its meaning. Some earlier writers on the subject had taken a much stronger line on the matter. Writing in the fifth century, Diadochos of Photiki declared that "If light or some fiery form should be seen by one pursuing the spiritual way, he should not on any account accept such a vision: it is an obvious deceit of the enemy"<sup>7</sup>. By 'the enemy' here he means the devil. Whereas for Palamas the vision of light was a positive sign, for Diadochos it was a negative one. These significant differences of opinion arise because the experience of light did not contain a single or unambiguous interpretation within itself, but was capable of sustaining a number of different (and even contradictory) meanings. Furthermore, the resolution of the dispute does not seem to have involved any deeper investigation of the *experience*. No one seemed to think that the experience itself had anything more to reveal.

It may be noted that there is a strong focus here on what someone *sees*. In the Mysteries at Eleusis, an initiate was known as an *epoptes*, which means 'one who sees'. This suggests that it was the *visual* dimension of the initiation process that was more powerful or important than anything else. Perhaps through its association with Eleusis, *epoptes* came to mean not only one who sees, but also one who has been *permitted* to see. If the Hesychast really did see 'the uncreated light of the Godhead', it was believed that this was because this vision had been granted by divine grace. The fact that the light has been seen therefore confers on the one who has seen it a special status, as one who has received the divine grace.

Unlike St Paul, the Hesychasts actively sought a vision of the divine light, and practised a recognised spiritual technique with the hope of achieving it. However, it is interesting that even within the same tradition three very different interpretations of this vision developed. What for Palamas was a vision of the divine was a work of the devil according to Diadochos, while Barlaam regarded it as essentially a physical phenomenon. Because he regarded the light as divine, Palamas believed that the Hesychasts were *physically* transformed by their contact with it, although not necessarily in any way that might be apparent to others. He identified the light seen by the Hesychasts with the light seen by the chosen disciples on Mount Tabor at the time of the

7 WARE, K (1986). "The Hesychasts: Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas, Nicolas Cabasilas", in: JONES, Ch; WAINWRIGHT, G & YARNOLD, E (Eds.) (1986). *The Study of Spirituality*. SPCK, London, p. 250.

8 PHOTIKI, D de (1979). "On spiritual knowledge and discrimination", in: *The Philokalia*. Vol. 1. Trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, Faber and Faber, London, p. 263.

Transfiguration (or *metamorphosis* in Greek) of Jesus. Psychologically, the Hesychast might believe that he had actually been allowed to see God, and had changed from being a spiritual seeker to a spiritual finder. And as Palamas regarded “the vision of the uncreated light as a foretaste of the age to come<sup>9</sup>”, the experiences of the Hesychasts would appear in some ways to mirror those of the initiates of the Mysteries. But the fact that the interpretation of Palamas became the *official* one does not guarantee that it was the *correct* one.

Hesychasts undertook (and still undertake) their journeys along the spiritual way within a particular and long-standing tradition, that of Orthodox Christianity. Working within an established and recognised tradition brings with it both advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps the most obvious disadvantage has just been seen. The spiritual path can find itself surrounded by a body of doctrine that imposes limits on where it is allowed to go. The tradition establishes a set of expectations for those who set out on the path and a set of parameters for what may be found along it. The tradition creates a context from which a spiritual path may be undertaken and within which it may be understood. Whatever the similarities between their spiritual experiences may or may not be, the Christian, the Muslim, the Hindu and the Buddhist set out on their spiritual paths from significantly different places.

For this reason, it is unlikely that a Christian would interpret any experience of light as meaning that Vishnu was manifesting himself. Indeed, could a Christian even *recognise* Vishnu manifesting himself in a vision of light? What might seem like an epiphany to a Hindu might be dismissed as ‘an obvious deceit of the enemy’ by a Christian.

A tradition sets limits to what a spiritual experience can be allowed to mean. A dramatic illustration of this can be seen in the case of the Muslim mystic al-Hallaj. In talking of his experiences he is said to have declared ‘I am the Truth!’ Some of those around him accused him of claiming to be God, and as a result he was executed in Baghdad in 922. This may be an extreme case, and al-Hallaj seems to have had enemies who were happy to exploit the opportunity he recklessly gave them, but the basic point remains. Within a tradition, it is acceptable to say or do some things and not acceptable to say or do others.

However, the requirement that an individual must conform to a tradition is only one side of the story. On the other side, a tradition can provide a great deal of support and assistance to the individual. Membership of a tradition protects an individual from isolation and enables an individual to benefit from the experiences of others who have gone before. One way in which this happens is through the institution of a person known as a spiritual guide, or spiritual friend, or spiritual teacher. Institutionally, a spiritual guide provides a personal link with a tradition as a whole. Individually, the spiritual guide is someone who has trodden the chosen path before and so can offer expert advice on what is experienced and what it means.

As with any guide, the role of the spiritual one is to lead people along the right path. The particular problem faced by the spiritual guide is that the path in question is an inner one. This means that whatever assistance is available, ultimately a person has to travel along it alone. A spiritual guide has to provide direction *from the outside*, and that means that they have to assess *from the outside* where someone is on a path and what difficulties they may be facing. Different traditions may have developed different ways of doing this, and different languages may have different capacities for describing the inner path. And presumably some spiritual guides are better at what they do than others. In the end, perhaps the primary function of the spiritual guide is a negative one, to prevent others from making serious mistakes.

## DETRADITIONALIZATION

The term ‘detraditionalization’ has been used to describe a widespread and heterogeneous phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century that played a significant role in what became known as

9 WARE, K (1986). *Op. cit.*, p. 253.



the New Age Movement. Detraditionalization means "rejecting voices of authority associated with established orders"<sup>10</sup>. Because the New Age Movement was principally a phenomenon of Europe and North America, the religious target of detraditionalization was principally Christianity, and in particular its Catholic and Protestant forms. The established religious orders of other cultures, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, were generally treated differently. Perhaps it is fair to say that while the institutions of Christianity were largely rejected, those of other religions remained largely a matter of ignorance, or at best indifference. While aspects of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism were embraced, this usually happened far from their original contexts.

The rejection of tradition may be seen as liberating in one way but isolating in another. The New Age Movement certainly did not reject spirituality, but it approached it differently. A key theme of the New Age Movement has been identified as 'Self-spirituality', the belief that "the initial task is to make contact with the spirituality which lies within the person"<sup>11</sup>. If we believe that we all have access to what lies within us without having to go through the mediation of any institution or tradition, then it is easy to see why the New Age Movement and detraditionalization went hand in hand.

There is a scene in the 1971 film *The Ruling Class* in which a deranged English aristocrat (played by Peter O'Toole) is asked why he believes that he is God. His answer is a simple one: "When I pray to Him I find that I am talking to myself". This might be taken as almost a caricature of Self-spirituality: people were encouraged to look within themselves, but stripped of all the restraints of tradition this exercise was carried out with little or no guidance as to what to expect or how to interpret what was encountered there. If the divine is sought within, then it can become easy to believe that whatever is found within is divine. We can only find within ourselves what is already there, but finding it may transform our image and understanding of ourselves.

The trend towards Self-spirituality also coincided with the development of various forms of psychotherapy that encouraged an introspective approach to the problems of life. In the New Age Movement the distinction between Self-spirituality and psychotherapy is not always easy to see. A third element to add to this equation was the invention or availability of a number of psychoactive drugs, such as LSD (first synthesised in 1943) and mescaline. These seemed able to simulate, or even deliver, experiences associated with spiritual paths, free of any traditional context or restraint whatsoever. With so many varieties of spiritual practice, psychotherapy or drug available, the opportunities for life-transforming experiences seemed immense. People were being encouraged to believe that the answer to everything lay within themselves. As Carl Rogers, a leading therapist, put it: "Experience is, for me, the highest authority"<sup>12</sup>. But just because someone *has* an experience does not mean that they *understand* it. It is always possible, as T.S. Eliot put it, that "We had the experience but missed the meaning"<sup>13</sup>.

Even before the New Age Movement had really begun, two very different people were exchanging views on the connection between drugs and mysticism, and sharing their experiences with the wider world. In 1954, the novelist Aldous Huxley published a short book entitled *The Doors of Perception* in which he described his experiment with the drug mescaline<sup>14</sup>. The title of the book came from a poem by the English mystic William Blake, in which he proclaimed: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite"<sup>15</sup>. Huxley's claims for the benefits of mescaline aroused the opposition of R.C. Zaehner, an Oxford academic and expert on Zoroastrianism. He also experimented with the drug, but was not impressed.

10 HEELAS, P (1996). *The New Age Movement*. Blackwell, Blackwell, p. 22.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

12 ROGERS, CR (1967). *On Becoming a Person: a therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Constable, London, p. 23.

13 ELIOT, TS (1963). "The Dry Salvages", in: *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. Faber and Faber, London, p. 208.

14 HUXLEY, A (1977). *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. Grafton, London.

15 BLAKE, W (1994). "A Memorable Fancy", in: *The Works of William Blake*. Wordsworth, Ware, p. 184.

The connection between drugs and mysticism is a long-established one, and although not every religious tradition makes use of them, psychoactive chemicals have played a role in a number of religions for thousands of years. However, a drug-induced experience that takes place *within* a tradition comes with its own context. The experience is to some extent anticipated, and it has an officially recognised and permitted meaning. A drug-induced experience that takes place *outside* any such tradition does not come with the same framework for understanding it.

Huxley is careful to *call* his experience with mescaline only a *visionary* one and not a *mystical* one, but when he *describes* his experience it seems to go beyond the purely visionary. The experience gave him not only a different *perception* of the world, but also a different *relationship* to the world. It was a more direct relationship with the world, because it was strongly non-conceptual, and also a more empathic relationship with the world, because self-interest seemed to play little or no part in it.

Zaehner regarded the experience Huxley described as an example of what he calls 'nature mysticism', a sense of identification with the whole of Nature. He does not wish to dismiss it, but he does want to insist that it should not be confused with "the experience of Christian or Muslim saints"<sup>16</sup>. However, he does acknowledge that "there are parallels between *some* aspects of religious mysticism (particularly some Hindu varieties) and *some* LSD experiences"<sup>17</sup>. Fundamentally, however, Zaehner wishes to argue that not all mystical experiences are the same, and that some forms of mysticism, and kinds of mystical experience, are superior to others. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that in nature mysticism 'the person who has had the experience feels that he has gone through something of tremendous significance beside which the ordinary world of sense perception and discursive thought is almost the shadow of a shade.' Furthermore, "The experience seems overwhelmingly *real*"<sup>18</sup>.

This reaches the heart of the matter concerning mystical experience. Whatever its origins, whatever its meaning, and whatever its contents, the experience seems to bring with it a powerful sense of its own *authority*. It is a kind of experience that appears to be subjectively difficult to doubt or question. That makes the question of what the experience *means* a very important one. As William James said, mystical experiences have a 'noetic quality'. "They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain"<sup>19</sup>. They *demand* to be listened to. But what do they *say*? When al-Hallaj interpreted his mystical experiences to mean 'I am the Truth', they killed him. When Shirley Maclaine interpreted her mystical experiences to mean 'I am God!', she was given a TV mini-series<sup>20</sup>. The contemporaries of al-Hallaj interpreted his statement in a Muslim context and condemned it. Interpreted in a New Age context, Shirley Maclaine's statement was wholly acceptable. However, being acceptable is not the same thing as being right.

The mystical experience does not seem to present itself as simply one experience amongst many. It does not give us just one more fact about the world to assimilate. In the writings of Huxley, it is clear that mescaline radically transformed the way he saw the world. Although the influence of the drug lasted only a few hours, the influence of the experience lasted a great deal longer. Borrowing a phrase from H.G. Wells, Huxley declared that "the man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out"<sup>21</sup>. But the advantage of those who go through the Door in the Wall from within a spiritual tradition is that they have a spiritual guide to check their experiences with on their return. Within the detraditionalized world of New Age Self-spirituality, such an authoritative second opinion may not be available.

16 ZAEHNER, RC (1961). *Mysticism: sacred and profane*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 199.

17 ZAEHNER, RC (1974). *Zen, Drugs and Mysticism*. Vintage, New York, p. 109.

18 ZAEHNER, RC (1961). *Op. cit.*, p. 199.

19 JAMES, W (1960). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Fontana, London, p. 367.

20 MACLAINE, Sh (1986). *Out on a Lim*. Bantam, New York.

21 HUXLEY, A (1977). *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

Because they both chose to take the same drug under controlled and supervised conditions, and because they both chose to write about their experiences afterwards, the accounts of Huxley and Zaehner of their experiments with mescaline are particularly interesting. Huxley describes how the drug changed his perception of some flowers: "Words like Grace and Transfiguration came to my mind, and this of course was what, among other things, they stood for<sup>22</sup>". The 'of course' says more about Huxley than it says about the flowers. Others might make quite different connections, or none at all. Zaehner described his experience with the same drug as "transcendence into a world of farcical meaninglessness<sup>23</sup>". The two men clearly approached the same experiment with very different expectations and presuppositions. By providing two very different personal contexts for the experiment, they unsurprisingly emerged with two very different sets of results.

It is sometimes said that the mystical experience is ineffable, beyond description, and this claim is sometimes used to place mystical claims beyond scrutiny. However, Huxley and Zaehner clearly communicate enough of their experiences for it to be apparent that they were at least different. If it is objected that these were not genuinely *mystical* experiences, then the accounts of the Hesychasts may be considered. They may not tell us much, but we at least know that they were aware of a powerful *light*, and not a powerful *sound* or a powerful *smell*. Similarly, Saul was blinded on the road to Damascus, but not deafened.

It may also be observed that *if* it is possible to bring about *genuinely* mystical experiences through the use of psychoactive drugs, then mystical experiences may not have the profound meanings that many spiritual traditions have attached to them for thousands of years. Furthermore, if the spiritual fruits of years of asceticism can be gained simply by taking a drug, then why not just take the drug? Why take a long and difficult path when a short and easy one is available? Whatever the truth of the matter, whatever the evidence, it is clear that some people (including Zaehner) found this idea unacceptable. For those people, the two paths *had* to lead to different destinations, and so a difference *had to* be found between them.

Whether Huxley's experience with mescaline counts as a genuinely mystical one or not, whether he was mistaken or not, he was *certain* he had gone through 'the Door in the Wall' and come back a different person. William James observed that, "As a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort *are* usually authoritative over those who have them<sup>24</sup>". It is therefore necessary to distinguish psychological force from epistemological weight. When Samuel Johnson described a friend's second marriage as 'The triumph of hope over experience', he was making precisely this distinction. We can feel subjectively sure about something without being objectively entitled to. We can have the confidence without the evidence. Just because I am psychologically unable to doubt something does not mean that it is epistemologically beyond challenge. A powerful experience can force us to see the world *differently*, but it does not guarantee that we see the world *better*. However, Huxley clearly believed he *did* see the world better under the influence of mescaline because it freed his perceptions from the limits imposed by "an animal obsessed with survival" and 'a human being obsessed with words and notions<sup>25</sup>'. Even after the effects of the drug wore off, he remained aware that his *normal* way of seeing things was not the *only* way of seeing things, and that there were different ways of looking at and experiencing the world.

## REFRAMING

For Gregor Samsa a different way of experiencing the world was enforced upon him by the changes in his body. However, experiencing the world differently does not need to involve anything so

22 HUXLEY, A (1977). *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

23 ZAEHNER, RC (1961). *Op. cit.*, p. 226.

24 JAMES, W (1960). *Op. cit.*, p. 408.

25 HUXLEY, A (1977). *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

dramatic. Someone's act of kindness can make me see the world as a kinder place, at least for a while. When that happens, I know that the world around me has not actually changed because of that act of kindness. I am merely seeing it in a different light. It *seems* to be a better place for a while, because my attention has been drawn to a positive aspect of it. The psychotherapeutic technique of reframing is based on the fact that I can sometimes *choose* to see things in a different light. Just as a metaphor or analogy draws attention to one particular aspect of something, so a frame provides a perspective from which and within which to view things. Changing the frame changes the way things appear to us. When the world is seen within the frame of pantheism, God appears everywhere, but when it is seen within the frame of atheism, God appears nowhere. For practical purposes, the pantheist and the atheist might as well inhabit two different worlds, and in a sense they do.

The idea that there can be more than one way of looking at things is neither revolutionary nor controversial. The *psychotherapeutic* value of reframing lies in the fact that what may look like an insoluble problem from one perspective may turn out to be soluble, or not even a problem at all, from another. For someone who is trapped in a particular outlook, the discovery of a different one may seem like a revelation. It would not be surprising if that discovery sometimes felt almost like being born again into a new world. While the new outlook may carry no greater *epistemological* weight than the old one, the experience of its discovery may give it a significant accompanying *psychological* force.

Exchanging one prison for another does not bring freedom. The person who simply moves from looking at the world in one way to looking at it in a different way does not necessarily make any epistemological progress. However, the realisation that there are at least two different ways of looking at the world is an important lesson in itself, and this was a lesson Huxley learnt from his experience with mescaline. Whatever any individual perspective may mean, the realisation that there are multiple perspectives has a meaning of its own. Reframing may be viewed as a technique for enabling and achieving this realisation.

Gregor Samsa did not find his outlook on the world improved because he became a gigantic insect, only changed. However, many would want to argue that mystical experiences provide people with a more profound insight into the nature of reality, and not just an alternative way of looking at it. As Evelyn Underhill expressed it, "We, from the valley, can only catch a glimpse of the true life of these elect spirits, transfigured upon the mountain"<sup>26</sup> The clear implication is that those 'upon the mountain' do not simply see things *differently* from how those in the valley see things, but they see things *better*. They see what those in the valley see, and more. The elect spirits have undergone a transformation that has not only changed their outlook on the world, it has also improved it. Using a similar metaphor, Isaac Newton is credited with the saying that 'If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.'

In the twentieth century, the physics of Newton in turn gave way to a very different kind of physics in what Thomas S. Kuhn calls a "paradigm shift"<sup>27</sup>. A mechanistic model of the universe was replaced by something very different, filled with a baffling variety of particles that inhabit a strange world of uncertainty. In the end, the Newtonian model of the universe gave way because there were too many things it could not explain and the new model could. Progress in science is made by the development of theories that are able to explain *more*. Looking at the world from the perspective of quantum physics, it is possible to understand more about how the world works than was possible with Newtonian physics. But as Max Planck wittily put it, 'Science advances one funeral at a time.' The move from one paradigm to another is a radical one and many are unable to make it. Instead they hang on to the old one because it is psychologically more comfortable even if it is epistemologically more problematic. In its own way, a scientific conversion can be as traumatic as a religious one, and can be like entering a new world.

26 UNDERHILL, E (1961). *Mysticism*. Dutton, New York, p. 414.

27 KUHN, Th S (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2ed, edition). Chicago University Press, Chicago.

Conversion of any kind can be understood as a radical (and often involuntary) form of reframing. Things are suddenly seen very differently. The scientific model provides a possible basis for assessing the superiority of one frame or perspective to another, for comparing the 'before' and 'after' of the conversion process. There is no point in jettisoning one scientific theory for another unless it is felt that the new theory in some way possesses greater explanatory power than the old one. When Newton spoke of seeing 'further', the implication is that by seeing 'further' he saw better. By 'standing on the shoulders of giants' it is possible to see more. Those who see more have a more complete view of things. While those 'from the valley' see nothing more than the valley, those 'upon the mountain' see not only the valley but also what lies beyond the valley. Both in science and in life, the more *inclusive* perspective is the better one, and the ability to see everything is traditionally a prerogative of the divine.

## CONCLUSION

People can change in all kinds of ways and for all kinds for reasons. People can change for the better and they can change for the worse. Most changes are minor and mundane. Sometimes, however, the trigger for change is a powerful experience that happens to us, and our lives can be transformed as a result. The physical metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa may be read as a metaphor for the psychological metamorphosis that countless thousands of people have experienced throughout human history. Because an experience always happens to *someone*, who that someone is makes a difference to how an experience is perceived and interpreted. This is well illustrated by the different results achieved by Huxley and Zaehner in their experiments with mescaline. The Hesychast controversy shows that just because an experience is a powerful one does not mean that it carries with it any clear meaning or significance.

It is scarcely surprising if people who feel they have been 'born again' into a new world find it difficult to doubt the revelation that has been granted them. However both psychoactive drugs and reframing allow people to experiment with different ways of looking at the world in a way that allows them to compare one with another. A new perspective is not necessarily a better one, and just because we find it psychologically difficult to doubt something does not make it epistemologically immune. Just because we have the experience does not guarantee that we understand its meaning, or even that it has a meaning. On the other hand, we cannot assume that every perspective is as good or bad as any other, and the history of science points towards ways in which we can understand how perspectives might be compared with each other. I have argued elsewhere that there is no problem with arguing that one outlook on the world is better than another, as long as we can be clear about why and how it is better<sup>28</sup>. However, I do not think that many people would regard being transformed into a gigantic insect as an improvement. Not every metamorphosis is a positive or desirable one.

28 CURNOW, T (1999). *Wisdom, Intuition and Ethics*. Ashgate, Aldershot.