

Transformative Experiences

Readings & Resources

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Sources from the Workshop

The modern authors from whom we drew our initial examples, and some of the analysis of those examples, are each worth reading in their own right.

L.A. Paul presents her account of the rationality of making (or abstaining from) transformative choices in her book *Transformative Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2014). As we noted in our discussion, her emphasis is on the choice to enter into or undergo transformative experiences, assuming an anthropology (that is, a theory of the human being) that is based on instrumental rationality and preference satisfaction. Nearly all subsequent work on transformative choice/experience within modern “analytic” philosophy references her book in one way or another. The book is helpfully structured, with Paul’s basic argument being expressed in the four main chapters, while the really technical details are left for an “afterword.” That means that by focusing on the main text and skipping the afterword, ordinary readers who have not been initiated into the intricacies of modern academic philosophy can easily focus on the main ideas, without getting lost in the weeds.

We took some descriptions indirectly from Iris Murdoch’s book *The Sovereignty of the Good* (Routledge Classics, 2001), as quoted in Crawford, below.

While he very rarely uses the exact term “transformation,” Matthew B. Crawford’s two books *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (Penguin, 2009) and *The World Beyond Your Head* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015) provided a robust source of examples and analysis of various parts of our topic. Crawford does a nice job of clarifying the way that many transformations are extended across time, and how (at their best) they bring us into alignment with realities that exist independently of us. He also considers the negative cases, of processes which seem to draw us *away* from those goods, which for reasons of time we couldn’t really get into in the workshop. His presentation of a traditional organ makers’ shop in Virginia, in the final chapter of the second book, is a very nice case study in what it means to be initiated into a community of practice that crosses the centuries.

The specifically Platonic approach to initiation is something that permeates a wide range of writings. Probably the clearest presentation is in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Reading this entire dialogue with our initiatory model in mind will yield great rewards, but the myth of the charioteer and the horses near the middle is especially important. As befits an account of how Love elevates the human soul to glimpse the highest realities, this is Plato’s most exquisitely beautiful and poetic work. There are a variety of translations available; any of them should do the trick.

After the basic ideas of the *Phaedrus* have become familiar through several readings of the dialogue, there’s quite a lot of helpful and inspiring analysis in the *Commentary on the Phaedrus* written by Hermias in the 4th century CE. The modern English translation, in two volumes, is

by Dirk Baltzly and Michael Share (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018 and 2022). There's good stuff throughout, but the most especially juicy material on initiation comes early in the second volume, which will be published later this year. This is a text which demands a bit more from the reader than any of the other items mentioned so far, but it will richly reward that diligent and careful study. A fraction—though only a fraction—of Hermias' commentary is also included in the notes to Thomas Taylor's translation of the *Phaedrus*, which was first published in 1804.

Perhaps the most succinct account in English of a Platonic philosophy of initiation is chapter 7 (usefully titled "Initiation") from Tim Addey's book *The Unfolding Wings: The Way of Perfection in the Platonic Tradition* (Prometheus Trust, second edition, 2011—available [here](#) in the U.S.).

Further Explorations in Plato

The initiatory model which we developed in the workshop can also be a very illuminating way to approach some of Plato's other major dialogues.

In the *Republic*, take a look at the famous images of the Divided Line and the ascent from the Cave to the vision of the Sun, in Books VI–VII. As you read, think about the various stages of revelation in the initiatory context, and where those appear in the dialogue. Note the connections between these allegories and the progression from the lower kind of "faith," through the (discursive) explanatory knowledge that is later revealed, onwards to love, and finally to the higher faith that aligns with the Sun or the Good.

In book X of the *Republic*, it may be valuable to read the Myth of Er, especially the description of the choice of lives in the meadow, in connection with the question: "Is there a *unique* or particular good for each individual, with his or her individual life?" (The truly ambitious reader will also connect this with each soul's "kindred star" as discussed in the *Timaeus*.)

Finally, Plato's justly famous *Symposium* can be read as an initiatory journey, beginning with purifications, followed by a successive unfolding of truth that reaches its climax in Diotima's speech, and then stepping beyond language into Love with the arrival of Alcibiades, heralded by the flute players.

Once again, there have been many translations of Plato's dialogues, and any of them should be just fine.

The Ancient Mysteries

The myths of the passion of Persephone and Demeter's search for her daughter, which played a major role in the Eleusinian Mysteries, is discussed in most standard presentations of Greek mythology, including Apollodorus' *Library of Greek Mythology* (various translations available).

The myth of the dismemberment of Dionysos by the Titans, which was central to the Dionysian/Orphic Mysteries, can be found in chapter 8 of Addey, *The Unfolding Wings* (cited above) and in M.L. West, *The Orphic Myths* (1st ed: Oxford University Press, 1983; reprint:

Prometheus Trust, 2016), though when it comes to interpretation of the evidence, West's bombastic claims and sweeping generalizations should be taken with more than a few grains—perhaps a heaping spoonful—of salt.

For a run-down of the scholarly evidence, as to what we actually know about what went on during the ancient mysteries, the bibliography to [this podcast episode](#) offers an extensive list. (Spoiler: we don't know very much! Speculation vastly outnumbers certainty.) I link to this more for the list of sources in the show notes than for the podcast itself; the guest who is being interviewed has the unfortunate tendency to talk as if his listeners already know what's going on, rather than in a way that's fully welcoming to (pardon the term) the uninitiated.