



Epiphanic Moral Conversions

Kristján Kristjánsson

Professor of Character Education and Virtue Ethics

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham



Email: k.kristjansson@bham.ac.uk



Damascus experiences...

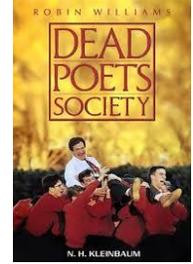
Caravaggio – *Conversion of St. Paul* c.1601
Sta. Maria del Popolo, Rome

• Acts of the Apostles
9:1-8 Vision of Paul
• "And falling on the
ground, he heard a
voice saying to him:
Saul, Saul, why do you
persecute me?"
• Saul becomes Paul
after conversion



- On the road to Damascus, Saul – the rabid persecutor of early Christians – went through an experience that had a profound effect on his life. A light from heaven flashed around him and he heard a voice imploring him to change his ways (Acts 9.3–7). Motivated by this ‘**Damascus experience**’, the sinner Saul turned into the apostle Paul through a religious conversion and a radical self-change of moral reform
- This presentation is about the second of those phenomena, **epiphanic moral conversions**, a topic absent from most current agendas in moral philosophy, moral psychology and moral education
- If broached at all by academics, such (alleged) conversions tend to meet with **scepticism** or outright denial

A lot of social science research slightly peripheral...



- The field of **near-death studies** which is peripheral in terms of frequency. For obvious (and fortunate) reasons, very few people will ever have the experience of being at death's door and then returning from there unscathed.
- The field of **religious conversions**, studied extensively within the field of psychology and sociology of religion. Research in this field rarely focuses specifically, however, on the change of moral outlook
- In the field of education in general, and **moral education** in particular, the is sometimes brought up in connection with a popular, if somewhat cliché-ridden, theme of a charismatic teacher who successfully challenges students to reform. But what distinguishes the self-changing experiences depicted there from those of more ordinary (gradual/incremental) personal development and growth, and how can self-change of this kind be triggered through classroom interventions?

The characterising criteria



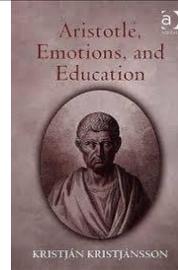
- These conversions constitute **abrupt, swift or even catastrophic turning points**
- The conversions must be **'epiphanic'**, involve awakenings (to purported new truths) that are not only abrupt in a temporal sense, but also spontaneous and dramatic, involving radical reconfigurations of mental structures
- The events eliciting the conversion will normally be unplanned and fortuitous. But in some cases, agents themselves may undertake measures to facilitate their own self-change. Moreover, educators may deliberately design interventions to shake the current moral foundations of their students. (So 3 categories: **fortuitous, self-induced, other-induced**)
- Epiphanic moral conversions are strongly **emotionally laden**. This can mean either that they are triggered by intense emotions, such as awe or elevation, or elicit fierce emotional responses during and after the conversion, or both
- Those conversions involve **radical self-change**. Realists will take it to mean that it involves an essential change of the deep, underlying self; anti-realists consider it to involve a radical shake-up of the agent's 'self-concept' or '(moral) identity'
- The change of heart triggered by the moral conversion must be towards **moral improvement or reform**

Not really Kohlberg's cup of tea...



- Kohlberg assumed that moral development is a **slow and laborious** process and that all agents need to progress through the stages in the same order, albeit not at the same pace
- Transitional experiences, from **working with dilemmas**, lack the full epiphanic quality of moral conversions
- Late in life, however, in an article that was first published posthumously (Kohlberg & Ryncarz, 1990), Kohlberg presented an unexpected twist on his theory by hypothesising the existence of a further, metaphorically named, **'Stage 7'** (yet not necessarily requiring full command of the previous stages). Perhaps influenced by existentialist and humanist psychology, Kohlberg and his colleague now mused that there could be a unique peak-experience stage of moral development, characterised by a 'cosmic' or 'transcendental' perspective, where moral truths are embraced through existential resolutions – intuitive jumps. (But this addition not well-known)

...and not Aristotle's either



- It is not as if Aristotle explicitly denies their existence – he does not mention them at all – but a plausibly Aristotelian position can be inferred from his general line of argument regarding the preconditions and nature of moral development
- One commentator remarks that Aristotle ‘clearly does not seem to have much patience for converting wicked adults’. That sounds almost like an understatement....
- Aristotle firmly believed that in order to be capable of ever reaching the high ground of the *phronimoi* (fully virtuous, practically wise persons), the soul of the moral learner needs to have been ‘prepared by habits’ (that is, via systematic early-years habituation) ‘for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed’. The effects of the antecedent circumstances of bad upbringing cannot be undone because of the intractability of altering ‘by argument what has long been absorbed by habit’; for a person in such a condition ‘would not even listen to an argument turning him away, or comprehend it [if he did listen]; and in that state how could he be persuaded to change?’

Also, lots of scepticism in psychology



- In **personality psychology**, the reigning Five-Factor Model of personality will consider any such change severely restricted by the content of one's Big-Five profile, which is supposed to be largely set in stone. No 'Damascus experience' will suffice, for example, to turn an introvert into an extrovert
- In **social psychology**, William Swann offers a whole *theory of self-verification* to explain people's resistance to change. Swann has conducted a number of psychological experiments which demonstrate that people tend to pay attention to, seek, believe, value and retain feedback that confirms their self-concept, whether that self-concept is positive or negative. These findings contradict the well-entrenched assumption that people are in general self-enhancement seekers and praise junkies. In contrast, Swann's studies suggest that once people have incorporated a given characteristic – however negative – firmly into their self-concept, they seek feedback that verifies that characteristic, even if it brings them intense pain.

Positive noises from psychology: Abraham Maslow



The very top of his famous pyramid of needs includes ecstatic '**peak experiences**'; experiences that are simultaneously, in Maslow's view, 'spiritual', 'cosmic' **and** explicable within a naturalistic framework

Those alleged peak experiences often include conversions from a sense of meaninglessness to a sense of cosmic meaning and purpose – including a **moral purpose** – and can thus fall under the heading of epiphanic moral conversions

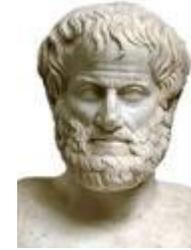
However, much of Maslow's work is questioned in today's academic (including 'positive') psychology for its 'grandmotherly' tone and method. Maslow relied substantially on biographical analyses of the lives of unique individuals and, in addition to that, on narrative interviews with a relatively small number of participants. Subsequent research has **failed to replicate** Maslow's levels of needs

Still a lot of unanswered questions (empirical and conceptual)



- What are the fundamental differences between **fortuitous, self-elicited** and **other-elicited** moral conversions?
- How **frequent** are they?
- What **triggers** them?
- How can they fit into a plausible account of **moral development**?
- Is there a difference between conversions in **childhood and adulthood**?
- Are moral conversions **reversible**?

Is the Aristotelian account of development towards flourishing flat and 'disenchanted'?

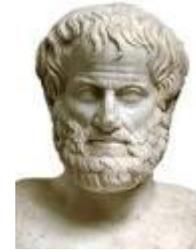


It is sometimes complained that some sides of human nature are largely unexplored by Aristotle, sides such that, in addition to being rational, we are also **spiritual beings**, responsive to beauty, imaginatively creative, without awareness of which any account of human nature becomes deflated and incomplete

Latter-day theorists have identified those missing parts in human beings' deep-seated orientation or urge – sometimes referred to as 'a transcendent urge' – towards extraordinary, idealised experiences of the **true, good and beautiful**. This urge is revealed in the inter-human **aesthetic** impulse and a strong drive towards some sort of **spirituality**. One could even argue that the desire for getting high on **drugs** – especially psychedelic drugs – has the same psychological (or biological) origin

Here, Aristotelianism lags behind **Confucianism** with its aesthetic appreciation of 'Heaven' (*Tiān*) and the 'Way' (*Dào*)

Why no awe? The problem may lie in Aristotle's emotion theory



So Aristotle gives a prominent role to emotions in the actualisation of *eudaimonia*

When one looks at the emotions that Aristotle describes, however, those fall broadly into three categories with respect to their targets: emotions directed at **oneself** (like pride), at **other people** (like compassion) or at **external events** (like fear). Notably missing from this list are any emotions directed at **ideals or idealisations**, such as beauty, truth and goodness in the abstract. There is no **awe** – either inspired by a heightened sense of beauty in art/nature, the mystic immensity of the universe or the unconditional goodness of an act of self-sacrifice

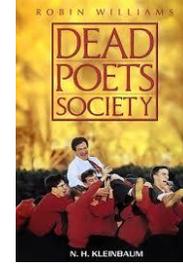
Aristotle does not appreciate the relevance for flourishing of what **Maslow** saw as top-of-the-pyramid 'peak experiences'

Hypotheses about awe and epiphanic moral conversions



- (a) **Awe** is a common (perhaps even a psychologically crucial) **emotional trigger** of epiphanic moral conversions
- (b) **Awe-proneness** is associated with proneness to such conversions. Awe is perhaps best seen not as a single discrete emotion but, rather, as a name for family of emotions that includes intellectual elevation and moral elevation, as well as aesthetic ecstasy. Of those, moral elevation (see Haidt, 2003) would probably be most relevant for moral conversions, so my third hypothesis is that
- (c) Epiphanic moral conversions are strongly correlated with reported **experiences of moral elevation**. This is in line with Haidt's (2003) suggestion that in order to understand elevation, we need to examine 'peak experiences' empirically

Education for epiphanies



If we consider popular accounts of charismatic teachers producing radical self-change in students, those can quite easily be reconceptualised as **exercises in awe education**

What John Keating did, for example, in *Dead Poets Society* was to inspire in students **awe at great literature** and the message it conveys about how to lead our lives

Unfortunately, schools often seem to function as **vehicles of a disenchantment process** where a sense of mystery at the wonders of life is gradually educated out of students.

However, less awe-proneness in students will (according to my hypotheses) **decrease** the likelihood of their undergoing moral conversions, either presently or later in life

This situation must be seen as potentially **remediable**, however; schools do not necessarily need to serve such a deflationary function

There are various **educational strategies** that may enhance awe awakenings (art, literature, nature, Socratic dialogues...)

Educational conclusion

Schooling which forecloses the option of an epiphanic moral conversion does not constitute good education – least of all in a liberal society

To what extent this option should be buttressed and stimulated in the classroom is another question, however, an answer to which will not only require a much fuller, empirically informed theory about moral conversions but also considerable educational *phronesis* on the part of the teacher

