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Stephen F. Haller

Wilfrid Laurier University-Brantford campus, shaller@wlu.ca

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Pilgrimage and Paradigm Shifts: The Role of Experience in Identity Transformations

Stephen F. Haller

Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford, Canada
shaller@wlu.ca

Some kinds of knowledge can only be acquired by direct experience. Engaging in a pilgrimage can transform a person by allowing them to inhabit different worldviews, or paradigms, that would otherwise remain inaccessible to them. The pilgrim then learns to see the world in a new and different way; has ideas not imagined before the experience, and; may even change their life in ways unforeseen before the pilgrimage. It is uncertain just how, and in what unexpected ways, one might change. Most often these changes are welcomed; however, it is unclear whether one's pre-pilgrim-self, before the change, would approve of the end-result. How can one rationally choose to undertake a pilgrimage that *might* cause change, when one cannot really appreciate whether that change will be for the better until after one has leapt into it? This makes the choice seem irrational and arbitrary. This paper argues that the most likely changes that come about on pilgrimage are a matter of reorientation, rather than a complete metamorphosis (although those happen). Religious experiences that change one's identity are most often a matter of reorientation of commitment, rather than radical transformation of self. The permanence of the change depends on the commitment to that identity after the change is made.

Key Words: paradigm shift, radical choice, transformative experience, conversion, pilgrimage, risk

Introduction

Pilgrimage can change a person. Many pilgrims are deliberately seeking spiritual experiences through which they hope to be transformed. This often involves the structure of a lengthy walk. Patrick Leigh Fermor, certainly felt *remade* by his famous long walks (although he doesn't describe them as pilgrimages). He writes:

It broadened my mind, taught me history, literature and languages. It opened everything up: the world, civilization and Europe. It gave me a capacity for solitude and a sense of purpose. It taught me to read and to look at things (Darlymple, 2013).

Nancy Frey also describes her experience on the Camino de Santiago as a life changing event that

turned my world upside down ... Nothing was the same. I wasn't the same (Frey, 2018:154).

Pilgrimage is not the only form of tourism that may result in a transformation of identity; and not all pilgrimages involve walking, but most are designed in ways that are conducive to spiritual transformation. Pilgrimages

have a narrative, a compelling story that connects the present to the past; provides goals, and; usually involves a recognised set of ceremonies completed during the pilgrimage, or to signify the beginning and end of a pilgrimage (Haller & Munro, 2021).

Just how do these changes in one's *self* come about? Is it really necessary to go on pilgrimage, or travel anywhere at all, to learn the kinds of things that Fermor mentions? After all, to discover a new way of thinking, one might think it is just as well to read books and contemplate ideas from one's bedroom. Henry David Thoreau certainly thought this; and this famed seeker of the 'higher pursuits' of spiritual experience advised people to not 'go off chasing giraffes,' but rather to 'direct your eye inward' (Dumm, 2008:178).

This inner reflection, however, might be insufficient. Some knowledge can only be acquired by direct experience. A pilgrimage transforms a person by allowing them to inhabit different worldviews, or paradigms, that would otherwise remain inaccessible to them. The pilgrim learns to see the world in a new and different way; has ideas not imagined before the experience; and may even change

their life in ways unforeseen before the pilgrimage. This paradigm-shift comes about by experience, and not by argument.

This makes pilgrimage a slightly risky endeavour. It is uncertain just how, and in what unexpected ways, one might change. Most often these changes are welcomed; however, it is unclear whether one's pre-pilgrim-self, before the change, would approve of the end-result. An example of a non-pilgrimage-related change will provide an analogy of a transformed self which is not in agreement with their previous self. A recovering alcoholic once explained that he no longer likes to get drunk because his sober-self disagrees with the way his inebriated-self thinks (when transformed by alcohol), and they get into disagreements (MacFarquhar, 2015:84).

In a sense, pilgrims can also become *different selves*. Returning pilgrims often seem to others to be credulous, and easily persuaded by the power of suggestion provided by a religious context. Camino de Santiago walkers, for example, too often describe *unsurprising* events, like a random act of kindness from a stranger, as the result of divine intervention from 'Camino-angels'. This often sounds to others like they have been indoctrinated into a cult. They may make miracles out of common coincidences—such as meeting the same person a few times along the way, as if it were fated. They often speak as if the trail itself had intentions to 'provide' just what one needs at the exact time one needs it. They talk about how the Camino itself 'teaches lessons'—as if the pilgrimage path were an intentional being with purposes.

Much more plausible explanations are to be had for these experiences in terms of ancient Stoic advice. The Stoic philosophers explain that random events happen of which we have no control. Regardless of whether they are good or bad, it is a good practice to accept, interpret, and integrate them into our lives in ways that will benefit one's emotional equanimity. One can indeed learn lessons, and be grateful for the kindness of strangers, and be profoundly moved by surprising coincidences, but these need not be seen as the result of some intentional agency and design, nor involve the supernatural. Intentions are relevant only with respect to how *persons themselves* choose to receive and react to events. It is one's reaction to events, the Stoics say, that is in our control.

Some pilgrims expound on theories of spiritual energy literally left behind by historical pilgrims as if it were a tangible thing that got rubbed off. They make these claims with *absolute confidence and certainty*—despite the fact that such theories are grounded in nothing resembling a convincing reason or even the slightest bit of evidence. Yet, the feeling that someone might have, no matter how strong, that something is true, is not a reason for validating that belief.

The point of these examples is not to judge such people. They seem to be as happy as anyone else. The point is that immersing oneself in the context of pilgrimage risks becoming the kind of person that talks in this over-enthusiastic language and thought—when one might not have been such a person to begin with. The pre-pilgrim risks changing in ways that it is impossible to know beforehand what it will be like. They not infrequently end up completely changing their jobs, or their marriage, or their daily thoughts. On setting out, one cannot imagine this possible future state of being, but can only project from one's *current* bank of experiences what it *might* be like. Only the pilgrimage experience itself can reveal what it actually feels like, from within, to be such a person. Thus, the pre-pilgrim, *necessarily* deprived of the relevant kinds of knowledge, cannot from their current perspective make a meaningful choice to undergo the risk of becoming a different kind of person than they are now.

Two Questions: How Radical is the Change? and How Reversible?

Two questions might be raised immediately. First, one wonders whether the transformational change involved in pilgrimage can be that radical as to be described in terms of different selves. (Philosopher L.A. Paul writes about this *kind* of radical change in her book *Transformative Experience* (Paul, 2014)).

Not all pilgrims will undergo such radical change of course. It is likely that pilgrims who seek only distraction or comfort will remain unchanged by their experiences. Somerset Maugham notes that

since most men take from their journeys only what they bring to them, often enough he comes home again with his impressions unaltered (Maugham, 1984:41).

It may be that some pilgrims arrive with expectations to begin with, and then they interpret their experiences in ways that conform to their pre-existing mindset.

On the other hand, some experiences can unexpectedly *reshape* one's psyche. Andre Gide describes how, when travelling in Tunis, 'certain parts of myself stirred. Dormant faculties which have not functioned as yet' (Gide, 1970/1921:15). This really is a transformation in terms of rearrangement of one's beliefs, and is as likely, or more likely, to happen to a deliberately questing pilgrim—as it was to Gide.

Second, one might also question whether these transformations, even if significant, are permanent or irreversible. One wonders whether talk of self-transformation via pilgrimage is merely metaphorical, or whether it is suggesting more objective changes in personhood. Take, for example, another familiar transformative experience; namely, that of those seeking spiritual experience through drug-taking. This causes objective, measurable changes in the brain and in personality. Michael Pollan describes how the molecule psilocybin found in psychedelic mushrooms can alter one's brain chemistry and rearrange neuronal interconnections. After such experiences, people describe themselves as being happier, calmer, and more spiritual. Cancer patients may lose their fear of death and gain 'a new perspective and profound acceptance' (Pollan, 2018:8). As a result of 'strange visions,' they emerge with a 'new form of consciousness' (Pollan, 2018:2).

Despite the tempting vision provided by these positive reports, it is unclear that one could reasonably choose to have such a drug experience. The person tempted to engage in the practice cannot possibly know what it is like to live with this 'new form of consciousness'—despite hearing reports from the other side—until after they have experienced it for themselves. Of course, by then it is too late to change one's mind, because, in fact, *that* mind is gone. There are long-lasting, perhaps permanent changes involving increased connectivity between brain areas not normally connected. The person taking psilocybin has willingly changed their brain's neuronal structure, 'dissolving the structures of the self' (Pollan, 2018:4), and thus radically changed who they are as a person. Pollan, while an altered-state seeking, psilocybin-taker

himself, nonetheless cautions that it is like 'rolling the mental dice with a psychedelic drug' (Pollan, 2018:5).

Granted, pilgrimage is a far safer way than drugs to open what Aldous Huxley called *The Doors of Perception* (Huxley, 1954), yet, the sought-for spiritual experience still involves the risk of becoming a different person that one cannot envision before the experience. It is only through engagement, brought about by actual pilgrimage activity, that one is even capable of seeing and appreciating the altered worldview that is created—and by then it may be impossible to close that door. Nancy Frey writes evocatively of her Camino transformation:

The door had been opened, the spring tapped, my eyes uncovered. There was no going back to my previous state (Frey, 2018).

Despite this possibility of radical identity change, transformation via pilgrimage is often more analogous to the awakening of 'dormant faculties' described by Gide, above, which are achieved through experience alone; than it is to Pollan's experiences with taking psilocybin. Hence, any changes are likely more easily reversible. Nonetheless, there remains the possibility of radical and long-lasting transformational change in one's outlook and way of life.

Paradigms

Making a choice between two worldviews might be conceptually impossible because the two ways of seeing are literally incomparable. From *within* either worldview, one can understand its appeal; embrace its internal coherent vision, and; find reasons to adopt its belief system. However, there is no way to step outside of both worldviews in order to make an independent, rational choice between them—because each one can be understood only from within its own system of thought. The historian of science Thomas Kuhn referred to this sort of situation as a choice between 'incommensurable paradigms' (Kuhn, 1962). With justifying explanations that can only be understood from within a particular paradigm, any defence for the benefits of that paradigm would necessarily involve circular reasoning, using concepts from the paradigm's own conceptual scheme to defend that very worldview. Thus, worldviews represent different, mutually inaccessible, worlds.

To illustrate, imagine an example of someone who transforms their attitude to risk in response to a travel experience. Suppose someone is normally a very risk-averse person. In their day-to-day life they take all precautions, they take Vitamin C to prevent colds; never drive a car much faster than they have to; always wear a bicycle helmet; and steer clear of places and events where too many things are beyond their control. However, on vacation in Bali, Indonesia, they are thrust into a very different lifestyle. The traffic is frighteningly chaotic, with many different modes of transportation sharing the road, including cars, buses, motorbikes, horse carts, pedestrians, and bicycles—all travelling at different speeds in an unpredictable fashion. They find themselves scuba-diving amongst sharks, despite the dive-master, ‘Mr. Coral’, assuring them there would be none. They climb active volcanoes in the darkness of night, only to discover, upon sunrise, that they are perched perilously between two precipices, with boiling lava on one side, and a treacherous trail down the other. The risk to their life is more immediate on the occasions when amoebic dysentery and typhoid fever threaten their health; and when a strong ocean current completely exhausts their energy reserves while swimming to shore after a long day of failing to learn the skills of surfing.

At first, this person finds these new activities to be very upsetting, given their normally risk-averse worldview. However, they are forced to adjust quickly to their new travel circumstances or face a psychic meltdown or cognitive disorder. In short order, they find themselves, surprisingly, enjoying this new adventurous lifestyle. They appreciate the rewards that come to those willing to take these risks. They philosophise about the fragility of life. They could have arrived at this outlook only by immersion in these experiences, and not by rational argument. They now doubt the wisdom of their previous self who was comfortable with familiar, non-life-threatening surroundings. In fact, their previous risk-averse self would have been *completely unable to understand* this new adventurous self with different beliefs and values.

There could be no rational arguments that would convince that previous self of the new-found wisdom because, from that perspective, safety is of the highest priority. From the perspective of the new adventurous-self, that

safety looks like negativity-bias focusing solely on the risks of loss, while ignoring the possible gains. Both selves would be unable to truly comprehend the other. There would be no reason to prefer one way of life over another, except reasons given from within one of these perspectives. One can only understand the perspective from within the paradigm, through direct experience. One must participate in a life before one understands that life. Thus, there can be no way to compare them, no way to choose between them, and no way to justify the choice after the fact.

The new adventurous transformation may or may not stick, depending on the commitments to it upon returning home. However, it would make no sense to describe the changes, in either direction, as better or worse. Each can only be evaluated from within.

The Choice Between Incommensurable Paradigms Must be Arbitrary

Alasdair MacIntyre discusses an analogous situation in his book *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 1981). In his project of defending a certain theory of ethics based on developing a virtuous character, he notes that we are all faced with an ultimate choice between adopting ‘virtue ethics,’ or the total absence of morality often associated with the nihilism of Nietzsche. However, such a choice *cannot be made* from some objective stance outside one of these perspectives, outside some paradigm. As such, he writes, it is a ‘criterionless choice, ... a type of choice for which no rational justification can be given’ (MacIntyre, 1981:39). This is because the very criteria for the choice of what counts as a reason for the choice, are provided by the perspectives themselves. It is not possible to choose one’s self from within one’s self.

To illustrate, MacIntyre elaborates the ‘radical choice’ between the incompatible ways of life described by the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard in *Either / Or* (Kierkegaard, 1959/1843). Kierkegaard describes two incompatible ways of life—the *aesthetic* and the *ethical*. The *aesthetic* way of life is when one’s life-project is solely about seeking aesthetic pleasures such as the passion of sex or the excitement of being absorbed in the moment; while avoiding commitment of any kind. The *ethical* life, on the other hand, is one defined by a

commitment to a set of ethical rules such as those to be found in marriage, family or a good job. Kierkegaard does not recommend one way of life over another. Rather, he simply describes both of them at length, and lets the reader evaluate them, and decide between them. Like any good novelist, he invites the reader, through his creative prose, to sympathetically imagine inhabiting these lives so that they can be understood from within the perspective of that life. Existentialists, like Kierkegaard, argue that the choice itself will, in a sense, *create* yourself. It will determine the meaning of one's life, and so one wants to choose carefully and wisely.

Unfortunately, choosing wisely and carefully proves to be impossible. As MacIntyre points out, this kind of choice must be a 'radical choice'—in the sense that there can be no foundational, independent reasons for the choice. As explained above, the very criteria for the choice are provided from within the perspectives themselves. Thus, in the end, the choice must be *arbitrary* since no rational justification is possible. MacIntyre asks us to

Suppose that someone confronts the choice ... having as yet embraced neither. He can be offered no reason for preferring one to the other' (MacIntyre, 1981:40).

Any reason given would have to come from within one of these perspectives. In a very pithy explanation, he writes that it 'is a choice beyond reasons, just because it is the choice of what is to count for us as a reason' (MacIntyre, 1981:42). Just as in the risk-averse / adventurous example, the two ways of life are incompatible and are capable of justification only using concepts understood within each paradigm. If one has not already accepted the risk paradigm, then reasons for adventure will carry no weight with the risk-averse person. Conversely, the risk-averse traveller will be unable to convince the adventurer of the wisdom of prioritising safety.

MacIntyre illustrates what is at stake by distinguishing between internal and external rewards. One can play a game, like chess for example, for the external rewards of winning, or fame and fortune—rewards which everyone can understand. However, it is only from within a game that one can understand the internal reward of loving a game well-played (MacIntyre, 1981:188). Similarly, the rewards of a 'pilgrim's mind' are internal to the lived experience of an actual pilgrimage. Only a pilgrim can

appreciate the meaningful experiences had on the road (and, perhaps, only if done 'properly' as a pilgrim (Haller & Munro, 2019)). One has to arrive at the destination via the lived experience of a pilgrim, and not as a traditional tourist.

Act, Then See

Given that such choices can transform one's life in dramatic ways, one might wish that they not be ultimately 'criterionless'—and therefore merely arbitrary. Pilgrimage can transform a person in ways without their even realising it. When the stakes are so high, the conclusion that the choice must be made without rational justification is unsettling.

Travellers might hope to research their choice by *trying out* different ways of living. The philosopher Albert Camus described certain kinds of travel as 'an occasion for spiritual testing' (Camus, 1991). Chris Matthews describes how the Victorian extreme-explorer Richard Burton

speaks to a belief that, in the trying on of many selves, he might find another, or at least more of himself (emphasis added) (Matthews, 2013:2).

If a paradigm is inaccessible except to those immersed in it, then the act of pilgrimage itself is the way to understand a new paradigm, a new way of seeing the world. Thomas Merton actually uses a pilgrimage metaphor in his argument for religious faith:

We do not first see, then act: we act, then see. ... the man who waits to see clearly before he will believe never starts on the journey (Merton, 1976/1951).

Transformational pilgrimage experiences are the only way to acquire knowledge of that mental, spiritual framework.

Irreversible Change?

If chosen, and merely 'tried out,' for reasons which must be arbitrary, then the newly acquired understanding *might* be reversed by returning to old ways of acting. The risk-averse / adventurer case is but one example of 'trying on' a new paradigm, and then returning home to the old one. Even after experiencing the joys of adventure, upon

returning home, they may find that they have reassumed the risk-averse position—unable to inhabit the mindset they had when they did those risky things.

Similarly, one might try to find out why others rave about the spiritual benefits of pilgrimage—by going on a pilgrimage themselves. The risk, however, is about how reversible these changes might be. Are they persistent and enduring like the drug-induced ones; or are they easily shrugged off like the risky adventure-induced ones? How is the would-be pilgrim able to make the choice, if the alternative paradigms are incommensurable and choosing between them must be a matter of arbitrariness?

The solution to both problems; namely, arbitrariness and reversibility, might be found in the idea of commitment. J. Davenport argues that what determines whether a choice is arbitrary depends on the commitment to the choice. He writes that

we establish a volitional identity through commitment to being one sort of social self or another (Davenport, 2001:84).

It's about continuous recommitment, not a one-time event. To illustrate his point, he borrows an example from H. Frankfurt that concerns three possible attitudes that an addict can have towards their addiction (Davenport, 2001:84). A person with a *willing* attitude identifies with their choice and consciously chooses it. A person with an *unwilling* attitude does not identify with the choice but, rather, hates it. Lastly, a person with a *wanton* attitude takes no stand either way, but merely acts on impulse without consciously choosing or resisting.

Pilgrimage is not exactly like an addiction. The point of the example is to introduce the idea of 'higher-order volition,' by which is meant that someone, even addicts, can 'choose to choose'; or in other words, make a commitment (Davenport, 2001:76). Thus, a choice is not necessarily arbitrary, or groundless as MacIntyre suggests, as it depends on one's *internal* stance towards the choice. The radical choice only appears to be arbitrary, with no rational justification, *if* one treats the choice as something *external to oneself*. However, this is to act as if we are seeking the reasons for choice from *within the paradigms* instead of *within ourselves*.

The real action is not the external act, but an internal decision in which the individual puts an

end to mere possibilities and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it (Davenport, 200:82).

It is, nonetheless, a decision filled with anxiety because there is no guarantee of results.

It would be like someone choosing a new direction in life. Trying to choose whether they should be a musician, or a teacher, or a scientist—as if they were looking externally at those lives from a detached point of view; and listening to descriptions provided by those who are living those lives. But, the choice is not governed by an objective accounting of which of these life-paradigms is 'best.' Rather, it is a decision that emerges subjectively from a person's life history, and personal experience, which is always evolving. It's a matter of commitment, of making it authentically one's own view. Kierkegaard describes such undetermined decisions as a 'leap of faith' that results in a conversion experience. It cannot be reduced to informed choice.

[It] is not purely intellectual but a matter of will and feeling ... [passion] ... as well (Flynn, 2006:10).

The point is that while one might fruitlessly deliberate, from an *external perspective*, the merits of incommensurable paradigms, it is only the personal experience of them that allows one to choose from the inside. Simone de Beauvoir explains the existentialist understanding of freedom in terms of facing up to this necessary contingency of choice. The experience of living in the present, from the subjective point of view, necessarily involves choice (de Beauvoir, 1976:76).

The pilgrim must be constantly choosing. This constantly recommitting, never arriving, state of consciousness might be the real goal of a pilgrim. Nietzsche urges us all to shun the desire of reaching a calm and peaceful state as a final goal in life. Rather, one should live 'passionately' and 'dangerously' in the stream of life with all its confusions (Solomon, 1999). One often longs to repeat the experience of pilgrimage because its 'completion' is not what it supplies meaning; rather, it is existing-as-a pilgrim itself which one desires.

In *Dark Nights of the Soul*, T. Moore urges that we live 'creatively' in ways that nourish the soul (Moore,

2004:206). This involves the risk of jumping into Kierkegaardian worlds of incommensurable paradigms. He writes:

to keep the unfolding self alive, you have to be open to change, every step of the way (Moore, 2004:65).

The key word in this quotation is ‘unfolding,’ which suggests a less radical, abrupt change of self.

To illustrate this idea, one can look to the life of philosopher and Catholic saint Edith Stein. In his book about her philosophical ideas, MacIntyre points out that her, apparently sudden, conversion-experience to Catholicism could be described in terms of moral commitment rather than a complete change of self identity (MacIntyre, 2006). He distinguishes different kinds of conversion experiences (MacIntyre, 2006:169-170). Only one of these kinds involves the ‘radical discontinuity’ of self-identity that has been described above as a risky possibility. Conversion might simply be the ‘discovery’ of a self-identity that was already there, but had gone unrecognised. Or, in Stein’s case, her new self was ‘simply’ a rearrangement of moral and political commitments that were already present. Her conversion was not a result of her embracing a radical new self, but rather, a change in personal perspective.

Oscar Wilde famously underwent a transformative experience in prison. This transformation did not radically disconnect him from his previous self, but rather, was continuous with it. In his essay on that part of his life, Wilde compared it with Dante’s transformation after a descent into the Inferno:

This new life, as through my love of Dante I like sometimes to call it, is of course no new life at all, but simply the continuance, by means of development, and evolution, of my former life (Wilde, 1913).

He did not find another self, but a revision of himself.

Might a pilgrim’s transformation be like this? It is a change, but not an irreversible one, yet, not easily reversible either. Everyone has a character and a history of commitments before they ever go on a pilgrimage. So, they are not choosing a self externally but, like Stein, rearranging their commitments. The experience of pilgrimage brings people together in a community of shared thoughts, and philosophies. Through direct experience of people, traditions, thoughts, emotions, and places, one connects with the world with a new awareness, and thus, escapes one’s self-centeredness. This often leads to development of compassion, gratitude, and mindfulness.

This transformational change is not an identity accidentally imposed on someone. It is constrained by their own experience and character. They have created it, adopted it, and enfolded themselves in the web of a pilgrim-community. Nancy Frey emphasises how the transition from pilgrim life to normal life involves integrating the pilgrim state of mind into one’s daily life back home (Frey, 1998). One commits to organising their life in a new way and choosing different ways to spend their time. It is this constant recommitment that turns it into a habit, and then it becomes something not so easily reversible.

The search for an objective foundation to ground our choices is fruitless. We cannot hypothetically abstract ourselves into an external perspective from which to make choices. The choices can only be made from within a paradigm of our lived history and commitments. But, constant recommitments are deeper than choices. Choices can be tried out to see what they are like, whereas commitments involve integrating them holistically into one’s self-identity.

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