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## *Self-transcendence*

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**Definition:** an act or experience that involves questioning the boundaries of the self as it is usually experienced and/or conceived.

### **Self-transcendence as a positive phenomenon**

During recent decades, the concept of self-transcendence has been employed in a broad range of scholarly contexts, resulting in the term taking on an equally broad range of different meanings (Worth and Smith 2021). One of the arenas central to the discussion and definition of the concept of self-transcendence has been psychology. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of self-transcendence has played a critical role in countering Freud-inspired definitions of the human organism as a homeostatic machine, whose main goal consists in restoring the energetic equilibrium placed in jeopardy by the emergence of pulsional tensions. Proponents of self-transcendence allege that such a definition unfit to acknowledge the significance of experiences of meaningfulness and fullness – see Freud’s interpretation of oceanic experiences as the continual survival of the primary narcissistic feeling of union (Freud 1961; Parsons 1998, 513).

Two significant instances of this anti-freudian employment of the term “self-transcendence” can be found in the psychological and anthropological theories of Abraham Maslow and Viktor Frankl.

In his mature reevaluation of his pyramidal model of needs, Maslow first began to acknowledge the importance of “peak experiences”, i.e. experiences through which the boundaries of ordinary self-actualization are overcome, and the involved person “can then become relatively egoless” (Maslow 1961, 257). A further development of this intuition brought him to consider self-transcendence as the peak of his pyramidal model of needs. The individual moved by the motivation of self-transcendence “seeks to further a cause beyond the self and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self through peak experience” (Kolkto-Rivera 2006, 30).

A similar approach to self-transcendence has been developed by the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. Explicitly sympathizing with Maslow’s critique of Freud, Frankl refuses the definition of the

human being as a closed and zero sum circuit of pulsional drives and energies. For Frankl, the human being is characterized by a unique capacity of pointing and directing towards something other than himself/herself. This feature is called by Frankl “self-transcendence” (Frankl 1966, 97).

Maslow and Frankl define self-transcendence as an anthropological phenomenon, rather than as a feature of specific kinds of religious experiences – e.g., mystical experiences – or simply as a phenomenon of mere psychological relevance. Moreover, both the authors seem to attribute a positive connotation to the concept, understood as an overcoming of egoistic self-reference and a radical openness to others. This positive connotation resonates with Erickson’s (1982) definition of self-transcendence as a non-egocentric understanding of the world. In recent years, an analogous understanding of this concept can be found in Shalom H. Schwartz’s theoretical construction of the “value wheel” model (Schwartz 2012). Under this model, self-transcendence is defined as an axis of human behavior including values orientations like benevolence and universalism, which are opposed to values of self-enhancement – e.g. achievement and power. Recently, Wong et al. (2021, 16) maintained that self-transcendence “motivates people to devote their time and energy to make positive contributions in society and appreciate little miracles in everyday life, thus resulting in greater well-being for themselves and others”. In a similar vein, Cueto de Souza and Scott (2022) explored the connection between self-transcendence and mindfulness, while Barton and Hart (2023) focused on self-transcendence as a driver of social activism

These perspectives suggest that self-transcendence involves the overcoming of self-interest and an constitutive openness to the world and others. This understanding resonates with the commonsensical use of the term. In presenting prototypical uses of this word, the online dictionary Merriam-Webster quotes psychiatrist Jeremy Heschler: “*self-transcendence* means that the individual’s own needs are put aside to some degree in favor of service to others”.

### **The complexity of self-transcendence**

In a path breaking article Yaden et al. (2017) provided an encompassing account of self-transcendent experiences. They define self-transcendent experiences as “transient mental states of decreased self-salience and increased feelings of connectedness”, in which “the subjective sense of one’s self as an isolated entity can temporarily fade into an experience of unity with other people or one’s surroundings, involving the dissolution of boundaries between the sense of self and “other.” (2017, 142). More specifically, they recognize two subcomponents of experiences of self-transcendence: an “annihilational” component, which refers to both the dissolution of the bodily sense of self accompanied by reduced self- boundaries and self-salience; and (b) a “relational” component, which refers to the sense of connectedness, even to the point of oneness with something beyond the self, usually with other people and aspects of one’s environment or surrounding context (145).

Yaden et al’s perspective has the important merit of dispelling two misunderstandings often triggered

by the phrasing “self-transcendence”, and particularly regarding “transcendence”. First, these experiences are extra-ordinary, and yet they are quite common (Yaden et al. 143), as around one third of people in from different cultures reporting experiences of unity with other people and their surroundings (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009, pp. 343–347). Second, the authors focus on a phenomenological level which does not involve any consideration about the moral value of those experiences. This approach allows for the acknowledgment of the potential pathological aspects of specific experiences of self-transcendence – e.g., self-loss in schizophrenic and psychotic conditions. This is perfectly compatible with the fact that self-transcendence is more often associated with positive outcomes such as well-being and prosocial behavior, these positive outcomes are not necessarily part of these experiences in themselves (Yaden et al. 2017, 144).

On a general level, the tendency to focus on positive aspects risks overshadowing those experiences of self-transcendence in which fragmentation and the perception of the risk of annihilation of the self are particularly salient. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that experiences of self-transcendence do not necessarily involve an openness to the other and to the world. Rather, they could also act in the opposite direction – i.e. in direction of the violent restriction of the self and of its possibility of acting, thinking and feeling. In a nutshell: even if we agree that self-transcendence involves the encounter with something bigger than ourselves, is it not possible that this encounter could produce a fragmentation and disruption of our selves? In Yaden et al.’s jargon: is it possible that the annihilation of the self takes place without a growing relatedness and connectedness to the other/s – a possibility acknowledged by the authors (Yaden et al. 2017, 150).

Addressing these issues requires a further exploration of the phenomenology of negative experiences of self-transcendence. To do so, it is helpful to move towards the domains of sociology and anthropology.

In some of his works published during the last 20 years in the fields of philosophy and sociology (Joas 2000; Joas 2008; Joas 2017), Hans Joas adopted a conception of self-transcendence which allows for the overcoming of this difficulty. Joas defines experiences of self-transcendence as: "experiences in which a person transcends herself, but not, at least not immediately, in the sense of moral achievements but rather of being pulled beyond the boundaries of one’s self, being captivated by something outside of myself, a relaxation of or liberation from one’s fixation on oneself" (Joas 2008, 7). These experiences, which can be both individual or collective, cover a wide phenomenological spectrum: from experiences of joyful identification with the other, to violent experiences of destructive hate. Moreover, experiences of self-transcendence can be developed through a process of articulation (Joas 2008; 2017) which could eventually lead to the genesis of a new ideal, or alternatively remain at an articulated and pre-reflexive level. In this way, Joas’s approach contributes a significant clarification of the conception of self-transcendence, decisively bypassing

the arbitrary restriction of this category to experiences of openness, benevolence and unselfishness. Joas' proposal allows thus for an encompassing account of the rich and varied phenomenology of self-transcendence experiences. Yaden et al. (2017, 144) propose to put self-transcendent experiences in a spectrum of *intensity* "where states like awe or mindfulness may be on the lower part of the spectrum—while peak or mystical experiences may be higher on the spectrum insofar as they are felt to be more salient, visceral, and memorable experiences". Through of an integration of Joas and Yaden et al's proposals, we might explore the possibility of adding to the horizontal axis of intensity a second vertical axis – the fragmentation-expansion axis. At the left of the x intensity axis we find experiences of self-transcendence characterized by a lower level of intensity and by a lower discrepancy with everyday life experiences; at the right of the x self-extension axis" will be experiences of self-transcendence characterized by a higher level of intensity and by a higher discrepancy with everyday life experiences. At the bottom of the y "fragmentation-expansion axis" will be located self-transcendence experiences involving a fragmentation of the self, in which the annihilation of the self is not compensated with a growing unity and connectedness to the other into a bigger unity. At the top of the y scale are experiences of self-transcendence involving a growth or expansion beyond the usual boundaries of the self and into a wider unity.

These two axes might provide a basic system of classification and allow comparisons between different experiences of self-transcendence For instance, a Durkheimian ritual experience of collective effervescence (Durkheim 1965) would be characterized by a high level of both intensity and the expansion of the boundaries of the self. Differently, experiences of total loss of integrity of the self depicted by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino by his concept of "crisis of presence" (De Martino 1972) would be characterized by high intensity and high perception of radical and disruptive annihilation of the self.

### **Self-transcendence and heroism**

This enriched model has significant consequences for the relation between self-transcendence and heroism. As different models understand self-transcendence as involving the capacity of putting our self-interests aside in favor of the others, this could suggest a direct link with heroism. Experiences of self-transcendence could be understood both as an input of heroic gestures – overstepping the limits of my personal ego might push me to heroically endanger my life – and as the output – heroic gestures produce experiences of self-transcendence. But this relation appears as more complicated once we embrace the model inspired by Yaden et al. and Joas. As this model also include experiences of annihilation and extreme fragmentation of the self, experiences of self-transcendence might also lead to impasses and even paralysis of action.

Here emerges the moral ambiguity of self-transcendence, which does not necessarily lead to heroic and altruistic behavior. This ambiguity can be captured by focusing again on the concept of

articulation. As Joas (2000) points out, experiences of self-transcendence can be articulated in very different ways. A shocking experiences of the loss of dignity of myself or of other person might push me into social activism, but it can also be the source of a disillusioned attitude towards politics and morality. And even “positive” experiences of self-transcendence might be articulated both through heroic attitude, and in a narcissistic focus on the power and the growth of one’s self, accompanied by indifference and disregard towards the consequences of our actions on others.

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