

## Conference Asks, “Can Exceptional Experience Save the World?”

How can insights from process philosophy and transpersonal psychology be applied to create a more sustainable, just, and humane civilization for future generations? In the context of the deepening global crisis, the Center for Process Studies recently convened a small, interdisciplinary group at the Claremont School of Theology to focus on this urgent issue. The goal of the “Exceptional Experience” Conference, held March 21-24, 2019, was to examine ways in which Whitehead’s metaphysics can be applied to foster ecological intelligence. Twenty-six participants with a variety of perspectives gathered to build community, brainstorm, and identify opportunities for change and adaptation.

Before the conference began, the group was asked to consider these questions:

- How do we understand exceptional experience?
- How can we integrate such experience into science and culture?
- How can exceptional experience be availed to address the global crisis?

Almost every culture over the course of human history has conceived practices that facilitate exceptional experience to heal and guide communities. In Whiteheadian terms, such experiences avail the mode of causal efficacy, which provides the fundamental interconnectedness of things. This deep understanding promotes ecological awareness and serves as an important counterbalance to the siloing of disciplines that pervades our current educational system.

In *The Aims of Education*, Whitehead says, “The essence of education is that it be religious.” He continues:

A religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence. ... And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity. (*Aims of Education*, Chapter 10, page 14)

This understanding of the fundamental connectedness of our natural world is basic to meaningful ecological action. In coming to see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, we understand that all our choices and actions have far-ranging consequences. From that understanding develops a sense of duty that “arises from our potential control over the course of events.” And where the knowledge attainable by that understanding can change the issue, “ignorance has the guilt of vice.” (*Aims of Education*, page 14)

The Exceptional Experience Conference experimented with a format that was designed to facilitate creative dialogue and establish a foundation for steps toward change. The intent was to engage “the state of imaginative muddled suspense which precedes inductive generalisation” (*ANW, Science and the Modern World*). Instead of formal presentations, participants spent time getting to know one another and then self-organized into small working groups, based on common themes and interests.

Discussion threads included ecological civilization, environmental ethics, social activism, alternative educational modalities, role of nonprofits, ethics and frameworks for exceptional experience, support for families (child rearing, death and dying), technological applications (apps, data ecology, social engineering, democratization of the Internet), archetypal cosmology, political and psychospiritual transformation. An important concern underlying all these topics was how to make exceptional experience and the Whiteheadian perspective that supports such experience more widely accessible.

The final session of the conference was spent organizing and summarizing recommendations that had emerged, including next steps – additional conferences, publications, podcasts, online courses, apps, and other projects – in the context of ongoing community building. Already an online philosophy and psychedelics course is being developed, a conference in the U.K. is planned for May 2020, and an app is being developed to unify people with prayer, chant, and more.

In his closing remarks, John Cobb urged everyone to pursue the “emergence of ecological civilization,” reminding us that “despair is the kind of prophecy that fulfills itself. Hope is extremely important.”

The conference organizers – John Buchanan, Lenny and Elizabeth Gibson, Andrew Schwartz, and Travis Cox – are grateful for the participants’ enthusiastic participation and creative input. The collective perspective of this group combined training and experience in education, process philosophy, transpersonal psychology, psychedelic research, ecopsychology, astrology, cosmology, architecture, digital innovation, data management, and smart communities. These people traveled to Claremont from five countries and eleven states throughout the United States: John Cobb, Jr., Kyle Buller, Philip Clayton, Carla Clements, Alice Dommert, Justin Evans, Alex Huppenthal, Franklin King, Sheri Kling, Todd Macintire, Farzad Mahootian, Daniel McQueen, Joe Moore, Steve Odin, Lindsey Owens, David Roy, Matt Segall, Peter Sjöstedt Hughes, Johanna Sopenan, Becca Tarnas, and Michel Weber.

*To hear the post-conference interview of John Cobb by Kyle Buller and Joe Moore, visit*

<https://psychedelictoday.com/2019/03/26/john-cobb-how-exceptional-experience-can-help-save-the-world/>

