

This is a preprint of a book review whose final and definitive form is published in the Australasian Journal of Philosophy [2015]. The Australasian Journal of Philosophy is available online at: <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>.

Paul, L.A., *Transformative Experience*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 1-189, £18.99

L.A. Paul's *Transformative Experience* is one of the best kinds of philosophy books. It is inventive and well-argued, and develops and attempts to solve a profound problem relevant to each of our lives: the problem of how to make potentially transformative, life-changing decisions in a rational and authentic manner. *Transformative Experience* has already received well-deserved public and philosophical attention, and should inspire research for years to come.

Chapter 1 briefly and cleverly introduces the book's problem and proposed solution. Paul asks readers to imagine the opportunity to become a vampire, and that everyone who has tried it tells you 'that they *love* it.' [1] Unfortunately, Paul contends, this kind of third-personal testimony and statistical evidence is not all you would want to know before making such a life-changing decision. You want to make your decision authentically: on the basis of a subjective, first-personal understanding of what it would be like for *you* to become a vampire. But therein lies the problem: 'you cannot know what it is like to be a vampire until you are one.' [2] Because you cannot know what it would be like to be a vampire, you appear incapable of making a decision that is simultaneously rational and authentic. And, according to Paul, this is not merely a problem about vampires. It is a problem we face throughout our lives: '[I]n many ways, large and small...we find ourselves confronted with a brute fact about how little we can know about our futures, just when it is most important to us that we do know.' [4] Finally, Paul suggests a solution: 'I'll argue that...the best response to this situation is to choose based on whether we want to discover who we'll become.' [4]

Chapter 2 clarifies the problem using Frank Jackson's famous hypothetical example of Mary, a neuroscientist who has lived from birth in a black-and-white room but finds herself released one day into the world of color. Paul argues that when Mary sees color for the first time, Mary undergoes an *epistemic transformation*: Mary learns something she can only learn through experience—she learns the *subjective value* of experiencing redness. [10-15] Paul contends that we all undergo similar epistemic transformations in our daily lives when we encounter new kinds of experiences—for instance, when we taste something strange and new, such as the durian fruit. [15] Paul then argues that fundamentally new kinds of experiences can also be personally transformative, fundamentally changing one's core preferences, values, etc. [16] Here, Paul gives some striking examples—of how a traumatic accident, religious conversion, death of parent or child, or birth of a child can radically alter who a person is, and what they care about. Finally, Chapter 2 argues that life-choices that are transformative in both of these respects pose a deep challenge to an attractive conception of rational choice: namely, standard normative decision-theory (the view that rational choice is a matter of making choices that have the best expected likely outcomes), given our desire to make decisions on the basis of expectations about the *subjective* quality of different outcomes. [17-29] Epistemically and personally transformative experiences appear to make it impossible to make a rational decision in this sense, as in such cases one cannot know the *subjective values* of expected outcomes. [30-51]

Chapter 3 then illustrates the breadth of the problem, suggesting it calls into question our ability to make many of the most important decisions of our lives in a rational and authentic

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manner. Paul focuses first on the question of whether it is rational for a person, deaf from birth, to receive a cochlear implant to hear for the first time [56-70]; second, on whether it is rational to have a child [71-94]; and finally, on decisions about our future more generally (decisions that affect our 'temporally extended selves', such as marriage, choosing a particular career, etc.). [94-104]

Chapter 4 responds to the suggestion that the problem might be solved using 'third-personal' information, such as statistics, testimony from others, and so on. Paul argues that this answer is 'unappealing in the extreme', as it essentially edits us out of our choices, alienating us from them. [112] We have reasons to want our choices to reflect who we are, and what we value—accordingly, the challenge of transformative experience is to determine whether it is possible to retain this kind of subjective authenticity, while at the same time making a rational decision. Finally, Paul offers a solution to the problem. Paul contends that it is possible to retain rationality and authenticity by choosing to endorse transformative experience itself, making one's choices—to have a child, try durian fruit, get married, receive a cochlear implant—on the basis of wanting to *discover* what the outcome of the decision will be like subjectively, whatever those transformative experiences turn out to be. One should choose to have a child if, and only if, one wants to discover what it will be like to have a child; try durian if, and only if, one wants to discover what that will be like; and so on.

*Transformative Experience* also contains a long and illuminating Afterword. Because it is the most technical part of the book, my summary of it must remain brief. Specifically, Paul further defends the importance of making choices authentically [124-31], drawing results from psychology, economics and sociology into the fold in support of her position [131-6]; she examines the implications of her argument for informed consent and addiction [136-41]; and finally, responds to several possible ways to alter decision-theory to better handle transformative experience [142-77].

*Transformative Experience* raises many important questions for future research. I believe that some of the most important ones concern how to identify and distinguish transformative experiences from *non*-transformative experiences. Some cases of transformative experience are intuitively clear. A congenitally blind person cannot know what it is like to see before they see for the first time. Other cases are less clear, however—and I think we should be cautious with generalizations. Might having a child be epistemically and personally transformative for some people but not others? Might marriage?

I believe Jackson's original Mary example could potentially be used to construct empirical tests of whether a given experience is epistemically and/or personally transformative. A critical part of Jackson's original example is that Mary *expresses surprise* upon seeing red for the first time. Prior to seeing red for the very first time, Mary can only say, 'I never could have known that red would look like that.' Her surprise is indicative of the epistemic transformation she undergoes upon seeing red for the first time. Conversely, if upon having a new experience, a person were *not* to express surprise—but instead say, 'That is pretty much what I expected, given the testimony of others beforehand'—then that would be grounds for believing the experience not to be epistemically transformative, as it would suggest the person subjectively anticipated the new experience extrapolating from similar past experiences.

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A similar method might be used for reliably determining which types, and tokens, of experiences are *personally* transformative. Personally transformative experiences, as Paul understands them, are ones that fundamentally change a person's core values or preferences. Accordingly, investigating the consistency between individuals' values or preferences before and after different major life-decisions—say, the experience of childbirth, receiving a cochlear implant, etc.—might provide evidence on whether a given experience is personally transformative for a given individual, and how often such experiences tend to be personally transformative across individuals.

Allow me to explain why I think such tests are important. Nearly all of our decisions are *potentially* transformative. For all I know, my decision to go to the nearby laundromat this evening may result in a profoundly transformative experience: I may witness a murder, for instance, experiencing new emotions that might transform me both epistemically and personally. Yet this mere possibility does not seem to lead to any problems, because the probability of such an experience is so small. Typically, when we make decisions, we do not need to know what *every* possible subjective outcome is like: we merely want to know what likely outcomes will be for us subjectively. To see why this is relevant, return to Paul's initial vampire example. Suppose scientific investigation found that approximately 90+% of people who chose to become vampires say the subjective experience of becoming a vampire is exactly what they expected prior to becoming one, and further, that their core personal values and preferences were more or less what they subjectively expected them to be prior to the transformation. Indeed, suppose just about everyone told you, 'You'll want to drink blood, but surprisingly, when you're a vampire, you'll experience that desire as being like a desire for a soda. Further, once you become a vampire, drinking blood tastes pretty much like biting into a nice juicy steak while drinking a fine Merlot—which you will almost certainly love, since you love the taste of beef and red wine.'

If this were what scientific evidence actually found—and what people like you testified to—then it seems like you *would* be able to subjectively project yourself into what it will be like for you to be a vampire. You would know that it's not likely to be substantially different, epistemically or personally, that what you subjectively expect now. And in that case, provided you are interested in probabilities, you might have enough subjective information to make your decision: you could make an authentic, rational decision on the basis of your past experience and subjective understanding of what it will probably be like for you to be a vampire.

It thus seems important to investigate which experiences tend to be transformative, and how often they are. Are genuinely transformative experiences as common as Paul sometimes suggests, applying to many of our life choices; or, on the other hand, are they relatively rare, only applying to certain types of momentous decisions (such as having a child)? Further, are there individual differences? That is, are some people more likely to experience certain choices (such as having a child) as more transformative than others? Again, these are critical questions to answer. After all, if a transformative experience is merely improbable, then, depending on the subjective knowledge one may have of more probable, non-transformative outcomes, as well as one's level of risk tolerance, one might have enough subjective knowledge to make an authentic, rational decision despite the mere *possibility* of a transformative experience.

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Overall, I found *Transformative Experience* to be a delightful book. I have not stopped thinking about it since I read it, and it has already profoundly influenced me as a philosopher and human being. What else can a reader ask for?

*Marcus Arvan*  
*University of Tampa*