

SYMPOSIUM

## Précis of “*Transformative Experience*”\*

L.A. Paul<sup>(α)</sup>

AS THE CLOCK STRIKES MIDNIGHT, Dracula comes to you. “Choose!” he commands. You have only a few moments to decide. You’ll never have another chance. Do you join the legions of the Undead?

The pressure’s on.

It isn’t really a surprise. You knew it was coming. You’ve been deliberating about it for ages. You’ve been touring castles in Romania, talking with Dracula’s minions. They are charming, beautiful, beguiling. They also think the choice is easy; of course you should do it! They soothe your worries with elegant replies, and enthusiastically describe their dark, blood-filled lives. You text your friend Paul for advice and are amazed when he tells you that he is also a vampire. He explains that he was unsure at first, because drinking blood seemed incredibly gross. But after thinking it over, he decided to do it. When you press him for an explanation, he tells you

that you actually have to become a vampire to understand its value, and reassures you: he knows you well, and he is sure you’ll be very happy too.

Faced with this choice, what do you do? Do you decide to become a vampire?

If you choose to become a vampire, you will become enfolded in a life of shadows, endowed with amazing new powers and pristine elegance of form. If you reject Dracula’s invitation, choosing the sun and mortality, you’ll embrace your humanity.

The problem is, how are you supposed to make a rational, authentically informed choice? After all, you know as much as any human can beforehand. And yet, you still don’t know something that’s incredibly important for your choice: you don’t know what it will actually be like to be a vampire. As your friend explained, you can’t: you can only know what it’s like to become a vampire

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once you've become one.

And this is the heart of the matter. If you can't know what it's like to be a vampire, how can you make this life-defining choice? How are you supposed to evaluate and compare your outcomes to choose what's best for you? Worse, how good is the evidence you've actually got? Should you really make an irreversible, life-changing decision based on the testimony of a bunch of vampires? They aren't known for being honest. In addition to their reputation for being manipulative and selfish, perhaps the brutality of Dracula's kiss twists their psychological desires.

You face a choice. Should you choose this new life? Or should you pass? The only advice I can give you is to read my book, *Transformative Experience*, where I explore the nature of these experiences and grapple with the philosophical and personal implications of decisions that involve them.

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Becoming a vampire is, as I define it, a *transformative experience*. It is a new kind of experience, one that you can't know what it's like until you experience it, and it will irreversibly and permanently change what you care about.

Of course, it's highly unlikely that you'll ever face the choice of whether to become a vampire. But real life does bring us choices with this conceptual structure. Real-life transformative experiences are momentous, life-changing experiences that shape who we are and what we care about, and many of life's big personal decisions concern experiences that are transformative. Going to college, having a child, joining the military, becoming a lawyer, and emigrating to a new country can be transformative. All of these decisions involve the real possibility of undergoing a dramatically new experience that will change your life in important ways. They are all experiences with a distinctive sort of character – there's a distinctive way it's like to experience them – and they are likely to permanently change what you care about and

how you define yourself.

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*Transformative Experience* is a book about how these kinds of distinctive, life-changing experiences make us who we are. Our decisions about them map our lives: they are the path we take to discovering who we'll become.

The experiences change you in two deeply related ways. First, they are *epistemically transformative*, that is, they transform what you know or understand. They do this because they are experiences that are new to you, that is, they are experiences of a new sort that you've never had before. Second, they are *personally transformative*, that is, they transform a core personal preference, in the process transforming something important about what you care about or how you define the kind of person you are. While, strictly speaking, you are the same person, after transformation you are realized anew. Who you are has changed in some deep and personal way, such that the self you are now is not the self you once were.

Strictly speaking, then, a transformative experience is an experience that is both epistemically and personally transformative: a new kind of experience that creates a profound epistemic shift that scales up into or creates a profound personal shift.

Crucially, for an experience to be epistemically transformative for a person, it must be new to them. As a type of experience they have not had before, when they do have it, in virtue of discovering what it's like, they undergo an epistemic transformation. There is an important type of (physical) necessity here: having the experience is necessary for knowing what it is like, and so having the experience is necessary for the relevant type of epistemic shift. By having the experience, the person learns what that kind of experience is like, and this gives them new abilities to imaginatively represent and accurately simulate possible states of affairs involving it.<sup>1</sup> Part of the key here is that there's something distinc-

tive about what you learn: mere descriptions don't suffice. You have to have the experience yourself in order to discover what it is like.

This is just an interesting fact about the limits of language and the way the mind works when it is faced with a kind of experience that is truly new to it. Think of admiring the color of the sky on a blustery spring day, or of breathing in the scent of your lover's skin. That color, or that scent, has a particular character, and we can't describe what it is like to someone who has never had this kind of experience. (Look at the sky now. Try to describe it without using color words. That's what you'd have to do to adequately describe the color of the sky to someone who has never seen color.) We can use metaphors, images, and poetry to try to capture these qualities by suggesting evocative comparisons, but unless you've had the right sorts of experiences you won't be suggestible in the right sort of way. For me to be able to describe to you what it's like to experience a sensory quality like light blue, you have to have had the right sort of experience beforehand.

It isn't just simple sensory experiences that defy description. Many of life's most momentous experiences have a special, distinctive quality about them that's like this. This quality arises, at least in part, from the contribution made by the sensory qualities involved in the experience. But the contribution can't be isolated, or somehow pulled out and separated from the rest of the experience. Think of the feeling of being in love. It isn't mere sensation, yet it isn't obvious how the sensory components give rise to the overall feeling. Somehow, being in love is made up of a blend of emotion, belief, and desire, giving rise to a distinctive kind of experience, with a distinctive kind of feeling. You couldn't subtract the sensory element out of being in love and still have the feeling, yet, (despite what some popular songs might claim) being in love isn't merely a feeling. It's an experience that involves beliefs, desires,

and other rich mental states. We can't capture the nature of these complex experiences with flat-footed descriptions any more than we can use simple language to describe the experience of seeing light blue.

As a result, knowing what the experience is like is the key that unlocks the door to a trove of additional important content: once the person can represent and simulate in the right way, they discover further information about this experience, including information that can lead to significant changes in their values, beliefs and preferences. Such discoveries are what lead to personal transformation: in virtue of having the epistemic transformation, the person changes in some deep and personally fundamental way, for example, some of their core personal preferences change, or how they understand their defining desires, intrinsic properties, or values changes. This is why transformative experiences are strictly defined as experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative.

Special questions arise with these types of experiences in practical deliberation contexts. (Not all transformative experiences are chosen or deliberated about.) A transformative decision is a decision about whether to undergo a transformative experience. Such decisions often involve deliberation about the kinds of major life changes that are transformative.

The difficulty, like with our vampire example, is that a person must decide whether to undergo the transformative experience before having the epistemic and personal changes that it entails. They don't know what the experience they are choosing will be like before they choose, and the choice is high stakes and life-changing. In my book I argue that, when people care about the subjective value of the consequences of undertaking a transformative experience, they can find themselves in a decision-theoretic bind.

This means that facing a choice to have a transformative experience is a very distinctive kind of situation to be in. In this sort of

situation, you have to make a life-changing choice. But because it involves a new experience that is unlike any other experience you've had before, you know very little about your possible future. It's a kind of experience that you have to have in order to discover what it's like. And so, if you want to make the decision by thinking about what your future would be like if you undergo the experience, you have a problem.

You don't know how the experience will affect you, and so you don't know how you'll respond to it. And (usually) it's an experience that's irreversibly life-changing. This means there's a whole additional dimension to what you don't know about your future: because the experience is likely to change what you care about and the kind of person you are, it isn't just that you don't know what your future will be like. There is also an important sense in which you don't know what you'll be like after having the experience. You don't know the future self you are choosing to become.

The problem is even worse if an important part of your deliberation concerns what your future life will be like if you decide to undergo the change. If what it is like to experience this life change is an integral or even essential part of why you think you want to undergo it, you find yourself in a dilemma. You don't know what your future life will be like until you've undergone the new experience, but you can't decide whether to have it until you know what it will be like. And since you'll change as a person by having the experience, there's a real, existential cost to making a mistake. For a choice that's this important, defining the very nature of who you are and the kind of life you lead, it is important to make it as carefully, as thoughtfully, and as rationally as possible.

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In my *Transformative Experience*, I challenge a widely assumed story about how we should deliberate about these momentous, life-changing choices for ourselves. In this

story, personal life choices essentially involve careful, forward-thinking reflection about what we should choose to do. If we are thoughtful, responsible people, we are supposed to make these choices in an informed, deliberate way. It's especially important to make these choices carefully when they involve other people, people who depend on us or whose lives are affected by what we decide.

On the usual account, making these choices carefully and in the right way is a kind of taking charge of your own life. The thought is that choices involve responsibility, and to choose responsibly, you need to assess how your choice will affect the world and how it will affect others in your life. Of course, you also need to assess how your choice will affect you. This is because your choices also structure your own life experiences and what happens to you in the world.

The ordinary story of how we are supposed to choose responsibly involves assessing the nature of each option. You assess the different possible ways you could act and the different possible results of your act. You map out the ways the future could develop if you go one way rather than another, and think about what the world could be like, and what you could be like, for each way to choose. You estimate the value of each path you could take, and the likelihoods of the expected outcomes. Of course, you also take into account expert advice and moral facts that bear on the question of what to do. If you choose deliberately, carefully, and rationally, you evaluate the options by weighing the evidence and considering the expected value of each act from your own perspective.

Here's one piece of the problem I raise. When an experience is a radically new kind of experience for you, a kind you've never had before, you don't know what it will be like before you try it. But you also don't know what you will be missing if you don't. You have to actually experience it to know what it will be like for you.

Even trivial experiences can be like this, but we don't usually pay much attention in those cases. If the new experience isn't a big deal for you, or is somehow easy to undo, it's easy to either skip it, or to go ahead and try it just to see what it's like. If you don't like it, you can just move on. If you miss out, it wasn't that important anyway. Maybe trying a new kind of food or reading a new kind of book is like this.

Big life experiences, especially once in a lifetime opportunities, are another matter. Such experiences are often transformative. This makes the decision to have one, or to pass up having one, a much more significant kind of act. You might only have one chance to make it work, but it's unclear what you are getting yourself into. It's the real life analogue of the genie who pops out of a bottle and offers you a wish. It's mysterious and exciting, and not necessarily what you expect it to be. It's also irreversibly life-changing. Transformative experiences come with big life choices like those where you have to make a commitment you can't easily change your mind about, like joining the military. Or maybe the choice is irreversible, like having a child. (Once the child exists, it's not like you can reverse time and make it as though you'd never become a parent.) It's the type of choice you have when you have the opportunity to emigrate to a country with a very different culture for school or to take a new job. It's an experience you can have that is so intense or dramatic that its effect on you can't be undone, even if there are other senses in which you can undo the action. The choice can seem reversible, but an important sense it isn't. The experience is such that it can't be wiped away or ignored, so it is effectively irreversible, making the decision to undergo one even more momentous.

Facing a choice to have a transformative experience is a very distinctive kind of situation to be in. In this sort of situation, you have to make a life-changing choice. But because it involves a new experience that is unlike any other experience you've had before,

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The thought experiment of choosing to become a vampire is designed to bring out how hard it can be to deliberate about a life-changing experience that is transformative, especially because of the way it makes the future unknown. You don't know what the nature of such a change involves for your own life and experience. In such a situation, you find yourself facing a decision where you lack the information you need. If you want to make the decision the way we naturally want to make it, by assessing what the different lived possibilities would be like and choosing between them, you can't.

As it turns out, many big decisions are like this: they involve choices to have experiences that teach us things we cannot know about from any other source but the experience itself. And, further, many of these new and unknown experiences are life-changing or dramatically personally transformative. So not only must you make the choice without knowing what it will be like if you choose to have the new experience, but the choice is life-changing. You know that undergoing the experience will change what it is like for you to live your life, and perhaps even change what it is like to be you, deeply and fundamentally.

A real life example, one that I discuss in my book and in a related symposium,<sup>2</sup> is the choice to have a baby. If you've never had a child, having one can be transformative. As many parents will tell you, having a baby can change your life dramatically and permanently. Unfortunately, what it's like to be a parent is one of those indescribable experiences that you have to have in order to know what it's like. It's an experience that is so complex, and so bound up with what it's like to form the distinctive parent-child bond, that mere words don't capture it. This is not to imply that the experience is indescribably wonderful – rather, it's complex, and experienced differently for different types of parents, and can depend on the different types of children that they have. For most parents, having a child is joyous, but comes with many costs and difficulties. Some people get pretty much that they expected. Sadly, for some people it isn't at all what they expected, and the tradeoff between joy and difficulty doesn't suit them. For others, what it's like comes as surprise, but the process of becoming a parent re-forms them so that they respond by welcoming the changes.

For the sake of the discussion, let's assume that you are physically able to have a child, financially stable, and have a willing partner. In short, conditions are in place so that all that's left to you is to decide whether you want to do it. The dilemma arises if your

decision to have a baby turns on what it would be like to become a parent. Lots of people make the choice based on just this sort of thinking. Having a baby is very expensive, involves making a lot of tradeoffs, and is effectively irreversible. A lot of people deliberate about it by trying to think carefully about what their life without children is like, and whether they want to give up this sort of life for life as a parent. The ordinary approach to the question attempts to compare the joy and meaningfulness of being a parent to the satisfaction and pleasure associated with having a productive, more self-oriented life and career. Having a child can mean that other goals and pursuits must be given up or moderated, and a central question can be whether the tradeoff is worth it. Is life as a parent something that would be richer, more satisfying, and overall better than life as a child-free person? Would having a puppy be a better way to satisfy the desire to love and care for a dependent? Is having a pet or a spouse enough of a family for you? The answers to these questions are tied to the nature of the life you'd have as a parent, and to decide what you want, you need to compare what your life as a parent would be like to what your life as a child free person would be like.

However, if the choice is based on the nature of your future life, the character of what your lived experience as a parent would be like, this is precisely what you can't know. Not just because there's some uncertainty about how you'll respond. Even if you knew that there was a certain likelihood that you'd experience a certain amount of joy but also, say, some stress, knowing this can't capture the particular nature and character of this experience. It's the indescribable quality of what your life as a parent would be like that you want to know about before you decide to trade your current life for that one, and this is precisely what you can't know before making this irreversible choice.

Of course, you can find out what the experts think, or turn to friends and family for

advice. But such guidance only goes so far. You should consider any information you can gather from science, medical professionals, and from the advice of friends and relatives, before you decide to have a child. But they can't (or shouldn't) make the decision for you, because you are one who will be held responsible for the decision, and you are the one who is expected to raise the child you bring into the world. In any case, they can't tell you what it will be like for you, even if they can tell you what it was like for others. You have to experience it for yourself.

This is why you are expected to weigh the advice and testimony of others using your own personal perspective in order to decide how you want to apply it to your own situation. You don't just blindly do what everyone else does. You think about it first. It's your life, and you know yourself best. The trouble is that if you want to make the decision based on your expectations about what it would be like for you to have this deeply personal, centrally important, life-changing decision, what it's going to be like to care about this baby even more than you care about yourself is precisely what you can't know.

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The way transformative experiences throw a wrench into the story of how we are to live our lives makes life into much more of a gamble than we ordinarily recognize it to be. We think we have control over our futures, and we do in a sense, because we bring our futures into being. Often, though, we know much less about what future we are creating than we think we do. This gives rise to a kind of absurdity in our attempts to rationally control and construct our lives.

One way to respond to this situation is to reject the idea that we are master planners. Instead, we can focus on the value of having and discovering transformative experiences.

There can be value in suffering and hardship, even if such experiences aren't something that we'd choose to undergo if an easier path were available. If so, perhaps what really matters, in many contexts, is the sort of discovery you make when you undergo certain major life experiences. It isn't the amount of pleasure or pain such experiences bring, but what you make of them: what kind of person you become in response.

In this sense, it's about revelation. You reveal yourself to yourself through transformation. You discover who you are when you undergo these experiences, and you form yourself in response. The nature of this discovery and the way you construct yourself in response is what you are choosing when you choose to have a transformative experience. In my book, I suggest that the way to make these choices both rationally and authentically is to live by choosing to have – or to avoid – the revelation associated with the discovery of transformative experiences. If so, in the end, life turns out to be more about discovering the lives we are constructing for ourselves and creating ourselves in response to what the world brings us rather than about enacting rigid plans for the future or realizing fixed, idealized, future goals.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. F. JACKSON, *What Mary Didn't Know*, in: «The Journal of Philosophy», vol. LXXXIII, n. 5, 1986, pp. 291-295; D. LEWIS, *What Experience Teaches*, in: W. LYCAN (ed.), *Mind and Cognition*, Blackwell, London/Oxford 1990, pp. 399-419; L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014; L.A. PAUL, *What you can't Expect when you're Expecting*, in: «Res Philosophica», vol. XCII, n. 2, 2015, pp. 149-170.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience: Replies to Pettigrew, Barnes, and Campbell*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. XCI, n. 3, 2015, pp. 794-813.

SYMPOSIUM

## Arguing with the Vampire\*

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**Abstract** Certain themes of L.A. Paul's *Transformative Experience* are explored in the context of an argument with a vampire. The major disagreement is about the extent to which third-party data should inform our decisions as to whether to embark on a transformative experience. Three case-studies are explored: becoming a vampire, having a child, and eating durian.

Keywords: Transformative Experience; Decision; Epistemologically Transformative Experience; Personally Transformative Experience

**Riassunto** *Discutendo con il vampiro* – Affronterò alcuni aspetti del libro di L.A. Paul *Transformative Experience* nell'ambito di una discussione con un vampiro. Il punto di maggiore disaccordo verte sulla misura in cui fattori terzi dovrebbero informare le nostre decisioni in merito a un'esperienza trasformativa. Prenderò in considerazione tre casi: diventare vampiro, avere un figlio, mangiare il durian.

Parole chiave: Esperienza trasformativa; Decisione; Esperienza epistemologicamente trasformativa; Esperienza personalmente trasformativa



### I

“A LOT OF PEOPLE BEG for this, you know,” she tells me. We are sitting in a bar in Singapore. It is near midnight.

I do know. Long before we became friends and she revealed her secret, I was well versed in vampire lore. I've read many of the books – my favorites are the Anne Rice novels, especially *Interview With a Vampire* – and seen many of the movies and television shows. I recently learned from her that although some of the stereotypes are wrong (vampires do show up in mirrors, and they

cannot turn into bats), most are true. Pale skin, aversion to sunlight, preternatural strength, subsistence on blood, death from a stake through the heart, heightened sensual pleasure, near-immortality – all of that is real.

It's also true that vampires are not born that way. Vampires can choose to transform a normal human into one of them. All vampires have this power, and so many mortals pester the vampires they are lucky enough to know, wanting to be turned, to be made into sexy, dangerous creatures of the night.

But I'm not begging; I'm not even sure that I'm willing.

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The benefits are undeniable. But I worry about giving up too much. Loss of contact with those I love. No more sunlight. Giving up my tenured position – unless I could somehow arrange to teach only at night and meet with my graduate students after sundown. Most of all, the blood. Biting people in the neck and *drinking* from them!

The real problem here, I explain to the vampire, is that I can't imagine what it would be like to be a vampire, so it's very hard to decide. I explain how I've been influenced by the ideas of my friend, the philosopher Laurie Paul, and especially her book *Transformative Experience*.<sup>1</sup>

Paul argues that the usual way to make choices is by simulating their probable outcomes, imagining what the experiences would be like and then assessing them to see how well they satisfy our desires. This is how one decides between ordering wine versus beer, or whether to take the day off and go to the beach. But Paul points out that are some experiences that can't be simulated; you can't imagine ahead of time what they are like. Such experiences are epistemologically transformative – you have new information as the result of having them. Think of the first time you ate ice cream or had an orgasm or dove into cold water.

Or think about becoming a vampire, which, coincidentally, is Paul's first example in her book. She points out that you can't know what it's like to be a vampire without first becoming one.

So I'm in a bind, I explain to my friend.

"Yes, yes", she responds. "But I can help. I was once human and, believe me, I'm so much better off now. Yes, sure, there's stuff you miss. The hot sun on your face, the taste of real food. But it's so extraordinary to experience the world as I do. It's so blissful, so intense. The heightened senses, the thrill of the hunt, the power. And I know you personally. I know what you like, the kind of person you are – please trust me, you would be *so* happy."

I don't respond and she adds: "It's not just me, you know. Every vampire I've talked to –

hundreds by now – says exactly the same thing. None of us have any regrets."

I'm still quiet, and she finally says: "Do you think I'm lying?"

Not at all, I tell her. But Paul has convinced me that, unlike an experience such as eating ice cream, becoming a vampire isn't just epistemologically transformative; it's also *personally* transformative. It changes the kind of person you are. In this regard, it's similar to other significant experiences, such as going to war or joining a cult. And this influences how I respond to testimony of the sort my friend is giving me.

I pick up my phone, open up the Kindle app, and read some of Paul's book:

A radically new experience can fundamentally change your own point of view so much and so deeply that, before you've had that experience, you can't know what it is going to be like to be you after the experience. It changes your subjective value of what it is like to be you, and changes your preferences about what matters.<sup>2</sup>

And then I move to a pair of passages that are especially relevant to the offer I'm now considering.

[...] it seems awfully suspect to rely solely on the testimony of your vampire friends to make your choice, because, after all, they aren't human any more, so their preferences are the ones vampires have, not the ones humans have.<sup>3</sup>

Your effort to evaluate testimony is complicated by the fact that even people who seemed quite anti-vampire beforehand can change their minds after being bitten, suggesting that some sort of deep preference change is indeed occurring. Although your friends, as vampires, report that they are happy with their new existence, it isn't clear that their pre-vampire selves would have been happy with the

change. For example, your once-vegetarian neighbor who practiced Buddhism and an esoteric variety of hot yoga now says that since being bitten (as it happens, against her will), she too loves being a vampire ... Maybe something about becoming a vampire changes people in a way so that, now, as vampires, they love being vampires.<sup>4</sup>

I elaborate: You see, right now I would hate drinking blood. But if were to become a vampire, my preferences would change and then I'd love drinking blood. But I don't *want* to love drinking blood. It's like the line by the attorney Clarence Darrow: "I don't like spinach, and I'm glad I don't, because if I liked it, I'd eat it, and I just hate it".

"You know that the Darrow line is a joke, right?", says my friend. "If he came to like spinach, he'd enjoy eating it. Maybe he has some other reason not to want to like spinach in the future, but intense dislike right now doesn't qualify."

I begin to speak, and she holds up her hand:

"You don't like jazz, right? Right now, you wouldn't choose to listen to jazz?"

That's right, I agree cautiously.

"What if you had the chance to take a jazz appreciation course, and if you took the course, you would end up loving it. Would you refuse to take the course, on the grounds that it will change your preferences?" She imitates me: "I don't want to like jazz in the future because I don't like it *now*".

I tell her that this is unfair. In this jazz example, I'm choosing ahead of time to adopt this different preference, so maybe I have a meta-preference where I want to want to like jazz.

She cuts me off, "Stop. Preferences change all the time. You get used to your environment, so soon your small and smelly apartment doesn't bother you anymore. Or you get bored with a song and don't want to hear it ever again. Young children find kissing gross and then puberty hits. You get old and then, one day, playing bridge seems like a

perfect way to spend an evening."

"A lot of these preferences choices are involuntary, but some of them are under your control. Shouldn't you want to make choices that will make you happy in the future? If all they are going to serve on your week-long cruise is spinach, isn't a good thing to start liking it? Other things being equal, isn't more happiness better than less?"

I hesitate. Well, ok, yes. But maybe after a transformation as radical as becoming a vampire, I'm no longer the same person. There are concerns about personal...

She interrupts again, "I know psychologists often get confused about personal identity<sup>5</sup> but this is just a red herring. Of course, I've changed a lot since becoming a vampire; there have been big-time changes in my qualitative identity. In some metaphorical sense, I'm 'a different person'. But I'm still me. Becoming a vampire is something that happened to *me*. It's not like one person died, and another one popped into being. Certainly, Laurie Paul understands this; it looks like her whole book is about people's ability to choose their futures wisely in cases where they are not able to simulate them. It's about transformation, not obliteration."

"And anyway," she adds with a smirk, "if you didn't believe it would still be you once you became a vampire, you wouldn't worry so much about what it's like for you to be one."

Yes, I concede, I'll be the same person after becoming a vampire. And it does seem, based on the evidence, that I will be happier person. If I were a hedonist, this would be a no-brainer. But there are moral concerns. Drinking blood isn't quite the same as developing a taste for spinach.

Maybe there's no reason why past preferences should take priority over future ones.<sup>6</sup> But there's no contradiction in saying: Right now I don't think drinking blood is ok, and I don't want to change, because if I thought it was ok, I would do it, and I don't want to do it because it's wrong. (If you don't like this example, surely you would agree that I should very much *not* want to adopt the view

that molesting children is just fine.) More generally, if you think your moral views are correct, you shouldn't want them to change.

Anyhow, I'm not sure I want to give up what I know now – which is that it's really wrong to treat people as food – and replace it with the messed-up morality of a vampire.

We stare at each other.

"Is that it?", she says.

Well, there's one more thing. Maybe I would like to have children. Vampires can't do that.

She rolls her eyes. "Why in the world would you would ever want to have children?"

## II

That's a good question, I say. Having children is another example Laurie Paul gives. She suggests that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine what it's like to have a young child if you don't already have one.

"Makes sense," my friend says. "But, unlike the vampire case, I'm sure that there's a lot of social science here."

There is, I agree. The study that everyone cites is by Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, where a sample of about 900 employed women were asked, at the end of each day, to recall each of their activities and describe how happy they were when they did them.<sup>7</sup> It turns out that they judge being with their children as less enjoyable than many other activities, such as watching TV, shopping, or preparing food. Other studies find that when a child is born, there is a decrease in happiness for parents that doesn't go away for a long time<sup>8</sup>, along with a corresponding drop in satisfaction<sup>9</sup> with the marriage that only goes away once the kids leave the house.<sup>9</sup>

None of this should be surprising. Having children, and particularly young children, leads to financial struggle, sleep deprivation, loss of enjoyable activities, and, for women, the physical strain of pregnancy and, in some cases, breastfeeding. And children can turn a happy and loving marital relationship into a

zero-sum battle over who gets to sleep and rest and who doesn't. Children provoke a couple's most frequent arguments – more than money, more than work, more than in-laws, more than sex, more than anything.<sup>10</sup>

"Sounds like a nightmare," she agrees. "So, just to put this back on the table, here is what I'd have to do to you to transform you into a vampire. It's just like in the Anne Rice novels except that ..."

But wait, I go on. There are other studies that present a different picture. It turns out that this happiness hit is worse for some people than others.<sup>11</sup> Somewhat older fathers actually get a happiness *boost*, while it's young parents and single parents, male and female, that suffer a happiness loss. Also, most of the original data was from the United States. A recent<sup>12</sup> paper looked at the happiness levels of people with and without children in 22 countries. They found that the extent to which children make you happy is influenced by whether there are childcare policies such as paid parental leave<sup>12</sup>. Parents from Norway and Hungary, for instance, are happier than childless couples – while parents from Australia and Great Britain are less happy. The country with the greatest happiness drop when you have children? The United States.

It's not just who you are and where you are; it's what you want. When you stop asking about happiness and satisfaction and instead ask people questions like "In the bigger picture of your life, how personally significant and meaningful to you is what you are doing at the moment?", parents claim to have more meaning in their lives than non-parents.<sup>13</sup> Other research finds that the more time people spent taking care of children, the more meaningful they said that their lives were – though they reported that their lives were no happier.<sup>14</sup> These data might really sway someone looking for meaning in life.

"It would be useful", my vampire friend said, "to find the best data on just people like you, looking at just what you value. That would tell you whether or not to have a child."

But that data might not be enough, I say. I take out my phone again, and start to read more from *Transformative Experience*.

[...] You can replace your personal approach to decision-making with impersonal decision-making, removing any crucial role for your experience or your individual, personal perspective when you deliberate.

But changing the decision this way gives an unsatisfying answer to the question of how you should make these deeply personal, centrally important, life-changing decisions. For after all, your decision concerns your personal future, and so an essential part of your decision is based on what it would be like for you to have the experience and to live the life you bring about for yourself. You naturally and intuitively want to make your life choices by thinking about what you care about and what your future experience will be like if you decide to undergo the experience. This is why you are expected to weigh evidence from your own personal perspective and decide how you want to apply it to your own situation.<sup>15</sup>

In another discussion, Paul gives the example of Sally, who decides not to have a child because of the data, and says:

For her to choose this way, ignoring her subjective preferences and relying solely on external reasons, seems bizarre. ... If Sally, in effect, turns her decision over to the experts and eliminates consideration of her personal preferences, she seems to be giving up her autonomy for the sake of rationality.<sup>16</sup>

My vampire friend interrupts me at this point.

"Wait. I can see that the relevant findings might not exist, or not be trustworthy. But is Paul saying that even if the data are good,

there's something wrong with relying on it?"

I nod.

"Then I just don't get it.<sup>17</sup> Suppose you want to sun yourself at the beach – for one last time, if you take my offer – and think the weather looks fine. But you turn on the Weather Channel and it says it will rain. You stay home, because you think the Weather Channel is pretty accurate. What's wrong with that? How did you lose any of your precious autonomy?"

This isn't a fair example, I respond. When I'm looking at the Weather Channel, I'm using external information to learn about circumstances, not how I would react to these circumstances.

"Ok, so take something very experiential, from my pre-vampire days. I've read books and spoke to people who described their LSD experiences very positively, and this got me interested and I decided to indulge. Similar positive testimony motivated me to try regular meditation. On the other hand, I've heard enough bad stories about heroin that I gave that one a pass. This all seems totally rational to me, and perfectly autonomous".

"Or take Sally. Of course, Sally might be mistaken in trusting the data. Maybe the research is done poorly – given the replication crisis, someone should be very cautious before giving too much weight to the findings from a couple of studies. Also, happiness data only matter if Sally cares about happiness and meaningfulness data only matter if she cares about meaning. If Sally's preference is to have a child, regardless of whether or not it makes her happy and regardless of whether it would add to her sense of having meaning in her life, then it would be silly for her to even look at the research".

"But let's suppose she wants to have a happy life, and has evidence that having a child doesn't make people happy, it makes them miserable, then she shouldn't have a child".

I shake my head and quote Paul again, responding to just this argument.

Suppose that Sally wants to be happy, but

that she is confident that she'll only be happy if she becomes a mother. Then she sees a lot of empirical data that having children makes people unhappy. What should she do?

Here the strategy of ignoring her own introspective evidence is a lot less straightforward. This is because the empirical data doesn't give Sally evidence that having a child would make her sad. It gives her evidence of what the average association between happiness and having a child has been for other people.<sup>18</sup>

"Hold it", my friend interrupts. "Are you saying that Sally should discount information about other people just because it isn't specific to her? Really? If you heard that Sally was suffering from a severe infection but had no plans to take antibiotics – because everything Sally knows about the efficacy of antibiotics comes from other people – you would think she was nuts. Sally is a person, after all, and so data from other people *are* relevant to her. When Sally took biology as a kid, did she say: Well, none of this stuff is relevant to *my* body, because they never studied *me*? Of course, she didn't."

"Well, the same thing is true about her experiences. Suppose Sally has her heart set on a certain beach resort, goes to a review website, and discovers that it has a one-star rating, with hundreds of reviewers describing it as the worst experience of their lives. Would Sally really conclude that these are data about the association between visiting the resort and happiness *for other people*, and hence they don't speak to what her own experience would be like?"

"I know that I'm moving away from transformative experiences here, but the same point applies even more for them. You should be *especially* sensitive to third-party data for transformative experience because your introspection and simulation can't do the trick".

Paul disagrees, I say. The inability to simulate the experience is a real problem with

transformative experience, because this sort of simulation is what *should* matter. Here's Paul on this:

So when I consider the major, irreversible, long-term and life-changing decision to have a baby, of course I should weigh what other people tell me about it, and I should also attend to what the best science says. But I also want to consider what I think it will be like for me. After all, I'm the one who will be spending the next 18 years raising my child. I want to base my decision, at least partly, on what I think it will be like to be a parent, and I want my thoughts and feelings about it to play a central role in what I decide to do. If becoming a parent is transformative, I can't rationally do that.<sup>19</sup>

"Well," says my friend, "Paul is certainly right that the important question for someone thinking of having a child is what it will be like for them, not for other people. But what if it turns out that your own introspection is a poor way of predicting your own future? What if it turns out that data from other people who have had the experience are actually more informative about what it would be like for you?"

"Well, crack a psychology textbook, buddy, because that's exactly what the situation seems to be. Our introspection about what makes us happy is famously flawed.<sup>20</sup> Just as one standard example, people tend to overvalue the hedonic effects of big houses and fancy cars and undervalue the pleasures of new experiences and new people.

But there is a better way, summed up by Dan Gilbert: When trying to figure out what makes you happier, don't trust your gut; check out the data. See what the experience is like for others. He quotes the 17th century writer François de La Rochefoucauld: 'Before we set our hearts too much upon anything, let us first examine how happy those are who already possess it'.<sup>21</sup>

I start to respond, but she is restless and

nods towards the door.

### III

I pay for my beer and then we walk, my vampire friend and I, towards a night market. She wears a dark cloak, and glides through the crowds like a wraith. The humidity doesn't bother her; she never sweats.

And then we find ourselves in front of a durian stand.

"Are you hungry?", she asks. Of course, she herself would not and could not indulge.

Well, I've never had durian, I explain. If it were pineapple, then it would be easy. I know what pineapple tastes like. I can simulate it. But to eat a durian would be ...

"A transformative experience," she sighs.

Yes, exactly! An epistemological one. And so there no rational way to decide.

"Wait," she says. "Just wait. I accept your point about vampires, your moral concerns." She doesn't hide her disdain. "But what the hell is the problem with durian? If you want to know how it tastes, just ask someone. Have you never tried a new food?"

Well, there's a special problem with durian. There's no consensus here. I point her to a website on the topic.<sup>22</sup> One 17<sup>th</sup> century missionary wrote, "The flesh is as white as snow, exceeds in delicacy of taste of all our best European fruits, and none of ours can approach it." Good, eh? Others, though, have described it as a tasting of "used surgical swabs" and "a bunch of dead cats". Ugh. So it's a tough choice.

I think for a while, and then walk to another stand and buy a Snickers bar.

"You're risk averse," she notes. "Not your best feature."

We walk.

She starts again: "I think you fetishize simulation."

"Imagine a long-married couple at a favorite restaurant staring at their menus. The man says he's going to order the Porterhouse steak. And his wife sighs, says he always orders the Porterhouse, never likes it, com-

plains that they always overcook it, and ends up eating half of her salmon, which he finds delicious. The man remembers none of this; he just has a real hankering for steak; it seems like just the thing when he's hungry. His wife tells him that he always says that. He concluded that he's sometimes wrong, he has a poor memory for the taste of food, and often his wife knows him better than he does. He orders the salmon. And he loves it."

"What's so weird about this? What did he lose?"

That's a small choice, I say quietly. Autonomy isn't such a big deal for small choices. But let's go back to what Laurie Paul said about Sally and how deferring to others for a choice like whether or not to have a child is "giving up her autonomy for the sake of rationality". This makes sense to me.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes we want to be authentic and autonomous beings, and for this, choice is important.

Here's an example from the philosopher Kieran Setiya.<sup>24</sup> Suppose you have a choice between A, B, and C, and you prefer A to B and B to C. Now imagine that you also value having a choice. This might put you in the position of preferring the opportunity to choose between B and C to simply getting A, even though you know that A is better than either alternative. Now, to be fair, Setiya thinks this is absurd. But I'm not so sure.

"We're not talking about choice here," she snaps. "We're talking about *data*. The man in the restaurant can still choose. Sally can still choose. They have their precious autonomy. The question is what they base their choice on. Their unreliable gut feelings? Or something that's actually reliable?"

I tell her that there is something wrong about going against your gut feelings.

Now she's really annoyed: "Sally is like someone who thinks homosexuality is wrong, and when you ask her to defend her view, she says it just feels wrong; gay people disgust her. And when you press her, she says: well, you have to respect my heartfelt feelings on this matter. They're *authentic*, she tells you. She's like someone who won't go on planes

because she worries that they will crash, and when you tell her that it's safer to fly than to drive, she tells you she doesn't care about statistics, she prefers to listen to her heart. And we're supposed to respect that?"

She glares at me: "Would you rather feel good about the dumb-ass way you make decisions? Or would you actually *make good decisions*?"

We walk some more, not speaking, cutting through a secluded alley, and I start to feel anxious about how this night will end.

"I won't transform you against your will, you know", she says, and I remember that one of the powers that vampires are said to have is telepathy.

"Though," she adds, "If I did, you would *thank* me for it later." And she looks at my face, and then laughs and punches me in the arm. "Kidding", she says.

#### IV

You know, I tell her, I really have been thinking of her offer. Maybe I've been looking at things the wrong way.

I tell her about another example by Setiya.<sup>25</sup> It's based on a scenario by Derek Parfit, but he takes it in a different direction. Setiya asks you to imagine that if you and your partner were to conceive a child during a certain period, the child would have some serious problem, such as chronic joint pain, say. If you just wait a week, the child will grow up to be fine.

But for whatever reason, you choose not to wait, and now you have a son. And he grows up and, though he suffers, he is happy to be alive. And like a lot of parents, you love him and he grows to be adult and you're thrilled that you decided to have him.

Do you regret your decision? Well, yes, in a sense. You're no dummy. You have to concede that, on average, it's better to have a child without this condition, better for him and better for you. But then again, if you waited, you'd have a different child. The person you love wouldn't exist. So it's hard to see

your decision as a mistake.

"That sounds like a paradox," she says slowly. "You're in a situation where the decision you made turns out to be the best one, even though, when you look at another way, you concede it's the worst one."

It's a problem for decision theory, I agree. The standard model is that you make decisions by assessing the options and choosing the best one. But it turns out that an option can change its value by the act of choosing it. It's not just whether or not to have children; it shows up for all sorts of significant choices.<sup>26</sup>

"I guess this is reassuring," she says. "Even if things turn out badly, in some objective sense, so that you would have been happier if you didn't choose to have a certain experience, you might still think you did the right thing. And my bet is that the same compensatory mechanisms of satisfaction don't apply if you just do nothing. You justify your actions, not your failures to act."

She concludes, "And this is a good argument for saying yes to transformative experiences. Even if they're wrong, they can turn out right."

I nod. There's a recent study done by Steven Levitt, I tell her, that's very interesting.<sup>27</sup> It was done on a website. People who visited the site were asked to think about something really important that they were on the fence about, and then they got to flip a virtual coin. If it was heads, people were instructed to go ahead and make the change; if it was tails, they didn't. And some of these changes were big. Deciding to open a business, quit their job, break up with their partner. Who knows, maybe some of these choices involved transformative experiences.

The website was left open for a year, and there were more than 20,000 coin flips. After the flip, for each person, there were two email follow-ups, one two months after the flip, the other six months after the flip. And they found that those who made a major change were more likely to report being happier two months later, and even happier six

months later. There was no such effect for the small decisions.

Now I find this really interesting but if this was it, it wouldn't show that making a choice actually had a positive effect. After all, the sort of person who is on the fence about getting divorced and then gets divorced might be more divorce-inclined than the sort of person who is on the fence about getting divorced and then decides not to. And the divorce-inclined might be happier post-divorce than the less divorce-inclined.

But cool thing is that Levitt also found that the flip mattered: Those who got heads were both more likely to make the change and reported greater happiness in their future than those who got tails.

And this suggests, I concluded, that when you're wondering about whether to make a big change in your life and you're on the fence, you are better off saying yes.

She smiles. "So," she asks me for the last time, "Want to become a vampire?"

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi*, p. 2

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> See C. STARMANS, P. BLOOM, *Nothing Personal: What Psychologists Get Wrong About Identity*, in: «Trends in Cognitive Science», vol. XXII, n. 7, 2018, pp. 566-568; C. STARMANS, P. BLOOM, *If You Become Evil, Do You Die?*, in: «Trends in Cognitive Sciences», XXII, n. 9, 2018, pp. 740-741.

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting discussion of prioritizing past, present, and future preferences, see M. SULLIVAN, *Time Biases: A Theory of Rational Planning and Personal Persistence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

<sup>7</sup> See D. KAHNEMAN, A.B. KRUEGER, D.A. SCHKADE, N. SCHWARZ, A.A. STONE, *A Survey Method for Characterizing Daily Life Experience: The Day Reconstruction Method*, in: «Science», vol. CCCVI, n. 5702, 2004, pp.1776-1780.

<sup>8</sup> See R.E. LUCAS, A.E. CLARK, Y. GEORGELLIS, E. DIENER, *Reexamining Adaptation and the Set Point Model of Happiness: Reactions to Changes in Marital*

*Status*, in: «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», vol. LXXXIV, n. 3, 2003, pp. 527-539; M. LUHMANN, W. HOFMANN, M. EID, R.E. LUCAS, *Subjective Well-being and Adaptation to Life Events: A Meta-analysis*, in: «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», vol. CII, n. 3, 2012, p. 592-615.

<sup>9</sup> See J.M., TWENGE, W.K. CAMPBELL, C.A. FOSTER, *Parenthood and Marital Satisfaction: A Meta-analytic Review*, in: «Journal of Marriage and Family», vol. LXV, n. 3, 2003, pp. 574-583.

<sup>10</sup> See J. SENIOR, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*, Hachette, London 2014.

<sup>11</sup> See S.K. NELSON, K. KUSHLEV, T. ENGLISH, E.W. DUNN, S. LYUBOMIRSKY, *In Defense of Parenthood: Children are Associated With More Joy than Misery*, in: «Psychological Science», vol. XXIV, n. 1, 2013, pp. 3-10.

<sup>12</sup> See J. GLASS, R.W. SIMON, M.A. ANDERSSON, *Parenthood and Happiness: Effects of Work-family Reconciliation Policies in 22 OECD Countries*, in: «American Journal of Sociology», vol. CXXII, n. 3, 2016, pp. 886-929.

<sup>13</sup> See S.K. NELSON, K. KUSHLEV, T. ENGLISH, E.W. DUNN, S. LYUBOMIRSKY, *In Defense of Parenthood*, cit.

<sup>14</sup> See R.F. BAUMEISTER, K.D. VOHS, J.L. AAKER, E.N. GARBINSKY, *Some Key Differences Between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life*, in: «The Journal of Positive Psychology», vol. VIII, n. 6, 2013, pp. 505-516.

<sup>15</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> L.A. PAUL, P. BLOOM, *How Should We Make the Most Important Decisions of Our Lives? A Philosophical Debate*, in: «Slate. A Team of Superpowered Misfit», 2015, 5<sup>th</sup> March – available at the URL: <<https://slate.com/culture/2015/03/transformat-ive-experience-by-l-a-paul-in-conversation-with-paul-bloom.html>>.

<sup>17</sup> The discussion that follows in this section is modified from my discussion with Laurie A. Paul in L.A. PAUL, P. BLOOM, *How Should We Make the Most Important Decisions of Our Lives? A Philosophical Debate*, cit.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ivi*.

<sup>20</sup> See D. GILBERT, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Vintage, Toronto 2009.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*.

<sup>22</sup> <http://mentalfloss.com/article/565968/attempts-describe-taste-durian-worlds-smelliest-fruit>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/perverse-incentives>

<sup>24</sup> See K. SETIYA, *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide*,



Princeton University Press, Princeton 2017.

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>26</sup> For other examples, see L.C. EGAN, L.R. SANTOS, P. BLOOM, *The Origins of Cognitive Dissonance: Evidence from Children and Monkeys*, in: «Psychologi-

cal Science», vol. XVIII, n. 11, 2007, pp. 978-983.

<sup>27</sup> See S.D. LEVITT, *Heads or Tails: The Impact of a Coin Toss on Major Life Decisions and Subsequent Happiness*, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016, No. w22487.

SYMPOSIUM

# Paul's Reconfiguration of Decision-Problems in the Light of Transformative Experiences\*

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on cases of *epistemically transformative experiences*, as Paul calls them, cases where we have radically different experiences that teach us something we would not have learned otherwise. Paul raises the new and rather intriguing question of whether epistemic transformative experiences pose a general problem for the very possibility of rational decision-making. It is argued that there is an important grain of truth in Paul's set up and solution when it is applied to a certain narrowly defined set of cases – choices to have a new taste experience in a safe environment, where no important objective values are at stake. But the way she generalizes this approach to large-scale life choices, such as the choice to become a parent, is less convincing. Furthermore, given a proper understanding of revelatory value, there is no need to reconfigure the agent's choice situation in order to enable rational decision-making.

KEYWORDS: Transformative Experience; Rational Decision-Making; Revelatory Value; Subjective Value

**Riassunto** *La riconfigurazione dei problemi decisionali nell'ottica di Transformative Experiences di L.A. Paul* – Questo lavoro si concentra sui casi di *esperienze epistemicamente trasformative*, come le definisce Paul, casi in cui abbiamo esperienze radicalmente differenti che ci insegnano qualcosa che non avremmo appreso diversamente. Paul solleva una questione nuova e alquanto intrigante, ossia se le esperienze epistemicamente trasformative pongano un problema generale per l'effettiva possibilità della decisione razionale. Si sosterrà come vi sia un importante elemento di verità nella posizione e nella soluzione di Paul, se riferite a un ristretto numero di casi – la scelta di provare una nuova esperienza in un ambiente sicuro, dove non sono in gioco valori oggettivamente importanti. E, tuttavia, il modo in cui Paul generalizza questo approccio investendo un vasto ambito di scelte di vita, quali la scelta di diventare genitore, è meno convincente. Inoltre, data un'adeguata comprensione di valori rivelativi, non c'è bisogno di riconfigurare il contesto di scelta dell'agente per attivare un processo decisionale razionale.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Esperienza trasformativa; Decisione razionale; Valore rivelativo; Valore soggettivo

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IT IS NOT EASY TO be a decision-maker. So many important aspects of our decisions are bound to be hidden from informationally impoverished agents like us. Uncertainty seems therefore inescapable. Orthodox normative decision theory offers a helping hand by providing an account of rational decision-making under uncertainty. But the uncertainty addressed by this theory is severely constrained; it only includes uncertainty about the actual state of nature. For example, the agent is supposed to know that it will either rain or not rain, but she does not know which of these two states will occur. The agent is not supposed to be uncertain about the possible states of nature (e.g., that it will either rain or not rain), the possible consequences of her actions (e.g., that she gets wet if she does not take the umbrella and it rains, that she stays dry if she takes the umbrella and it rains), the set of actions (e.g., taking the umbrella and not taking the umbrella). She is also supposed to have determinate preferences for all possible consequences (e.g., a preference for staying dry over getting soaked), and determinate credences (degrees of belief) about all possible states of nature (e.g., her credence that it will rain is 0.5).

This limited focus is questioned by a rapidly expanding research field in economics and decision theory. Instead the aim of this research is to elucidate decision making under a more pervasive kind of uncertainty, "deep uncertainty" or "severe uncertainty", as it is often called.<sup>1</sup> One important kind of uncertainty regarding possible consequences that has recently been discussed is "awareness of unawareness", or "conscious unawareness", i.e., cases where the agent is aware of significant "blind spots" in her current information about possible outcomes.<sup>2</sup> In these cases, she is aware of the possibility that some action leads to an outcome that, given her currently available information, she does not or cannot fully grasp. She also knows that these outcomes can make a significant difference to the desirability of the action. She might, for example, consider the possibility

of new scientific discoveries or new technological breakthroughs that could be beneficial or harmful given her current aims, without being able to grasp those discoveries and breakthroughs. This inability to grasp can be due to lack of relevant scientific or technological knowledge or, more radically, due to lack of certain crucial concepts used to describe these discoveries or breakthroughs.

Paul's book could be seen as an important contribution to this debate about decision making under "awareness of unawareness", a debate that so far has had very little input from philosophers. More specifically, it could be seen as a philosophical contribution to the debate about decision-making under "growing awareness", where the decision-maker knows that possible consequences that are currently unimaginable will be known once she has performed the action.<sup>3</sup> In Paul's cases, the possibility that is currently unimaginable is "what it would be like" or "how it would feel" to live a certain life (or a part thereof), and it is unimaginable because the agent has not yet had the experiences that would be part of this life. Once the agent has started to lead the life, she will know how it feels to live it. Paul lists many cases of this kind, some are small scale, others large scale; some are realistic, others unrealistic: eating a durian for the first time, eating vegemite for the first time, becoming a parent, becoming a vampire, becoming a doctor, joining a war, choosing to have a new sensory ability (sight or hearing). These *transformative* choices, as Paul calls them, will not only bring about radically different experiences, they will often also radically change our personality and preferences. Paul claims that such changes pose difficult but different challenges for rational decision-making. One challenge is that choices that result in changes to personality and preferences raise the question of which self to consult when making the choice: the self that exists prior to the transformation or the self that the transformation creates. When deliberating about whether to become a parent, should you consult your current and

career-driven self, or the family-oriented person that you expect you will become after you have your child?

Another problem with this radical change in experience, applied to the choice of becoming a parent, is this. Since one cannot, Paul thinks, know what it is *like* to be a parent before one has actually experienced it, one can neither rationally decide to become a parent, nor decide to stay childfree, by “mentally simulating” the experience of being a parent. But such a simulation of what it would be like for one to experience being a parent is how one should approach this decision, according to the “predominant cultural paradigm”.<sup>4</sup> According to this paradigm, when making a rational decision about whether to become a parent, one estimates the “subjective value” of experiencing the outcome of the choice to become a parent, and similarly for the experience of living a childfree life, and chooses the alternative that has the highest expectation of subjective value. But since one cannot know what it is like to be a parent before having had the experience of being one, one cannot assign this experience a subjective value. Hence, since a necessary condition for the possibility of making a rational choice in the situation in question is the ability to compare the subjective values of the two outcomes, one cannot rationally solve this decision-problem.<sup>5</sup>

So how should one then make this life changing decision? Paul’s proposal is that when it comes to this and other transformative choices, we should “reformulate” or “reconfigure” the decision-problem so that it is seen as a choice between having and avoiding a *revelation*.<sup>6</sup> In particular, we should frame the parenthood decision-problem in terms of whether we want to *discover* what parenthood would be like for us. But her solution can be applied to other cases too. When you consider the option of becoming a vampire, you should not frame the decision as involving a choice to realize the outcome described as *what it is like* to be a vampire, but as involving a choice to realize an outcome de-

scribed as *discovering what it is like* to be a vampire.<sup>7</sup> When you wonder whether to join the war, you should not ask yourself what it would be *like* to join the war; you should ask yourself whether you would want to *discover* what it is like to be a soldier. When you wonder whether to become a doctor, you should not ask yourself what it would be *like* to become a doctor; you should ask yourself whether you would want to *discover* what it is like to be a doctor. More specifically, you should ask yourself whether you think the *revelation* of what it is like to live these lives itself has subjective value (regardless of whether the revealed experiences themselves have any subjective value). By invoking this subjective revelatory value, you can now compare the outcome of a transformative experience to the status quo; and you can compare them without invoking any objective values. So, we have not strayed beyond, what Paul calls, “our cultural paradigm”.<sup>8</sup>

In this short commentary, I shall focus on cases of *epistemically transformative experiences*, as Paul calls them, cases where we have radically different experiences that teach us something we would not have learned otherwise – what it would be like to lead a certain life. The reasons why I put aside cases of personally transformative experiences, where our personality and preferences change, is, first, that Paul says comparatively little about this problem and its solution and, second, that there already is a quite extensive literature on this problem, which Paul does not address.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Paul raises the new and rather intriguing question of whether epistemic transformative experiences pose a general problem for the possibility of rational decision-making. I shall argue that there is an important grain of truth in Paul’s set up and solution when it is applied to a certain narrowly defined set of cases – choices to have a new taste experience in a safe environment, where no important objective values are at stake. But the way she generalizes this approach to large-scale life choices, such as the choice to become a parent, is less convincing.

I should stress, however, that the book has many virtues. One is that, in contrast with the mainstream discussion about growing awareness, the discussion in Paul's book pays close attention to vivid examples of growing awareness and the philosophical issues they generate. Another is the many interesting applications and extensions of her account. For example, she gives a very thoughtful discussion of the controversial question of whether deaf parents who have had a deaf child should opt to give their child an implant that will restore the child's hearing.<sup>10</sup>

When we ponder whether to try durian for the first time, in a safe environment, knowing that eating it does not put any prudential or moral values (or any other objective values) at risk, it seems sensible to be interested only in how the fruit will taste. Since we cannot know in advance exactly how the fruit will taste – other people's reports will provide limited or even conflicting information – it is sensible to frame the choice as one between *coming to know* how durian tastes and *not coming to know this*. If you are curious, you will have a go and then add this experience to your collection of gustatory experiences. This seems rational, since you prefer knowing how it tastes to not knowing it and nothing else is at stake. The focus on the revelatory value of outcomes seems therefore to be justified in this kind of case. (Whether this value is "subjective" in Paul's sense of the term is a different question, which we will come back to later).

But large-scale life choices are not like gustatory choices in safe environments. First of all, as Paul herself stresses, large-scale choices will often be personally transformative since they bring about a change in your personality and fundamental preferences. But, second, putting this thorny issue aside, choosing to become a parent, join a war, become a doctor, or become a vampire, is not like choosing to taste a durian, for these bigger life-choices involve many important prudential and moral values and they are set in environments that are far from safe. A lot is

at stake, both in terms of prudential and moral values, in joining a war or becoming a vampire. The war can be unjust and sucking blood out of humans is morally problematic to say the least. But even the choice to become a parent can have drastic effects on one's career possibilities. Important moral values can also be at stake. It is hardly morally indifferent to create a child who will live in a happy and loving relationship with you and others. Note also that creating a new life enables a whole new branch of the family tree to be created; again, hardly something that is morally indifferent. Indeed, some have recently argued that having an extra child is the choice that might have the greatest carbon footprint of all the individual choices we make in our life since this child might have a child, who might have a child, and so on for generations.

Paul does, in fact, concede that large-scale life choices often involve important objective values, but she thinks that subjective values are still some of the most «central and important ones and an emphasis on them fits the dominant cultural paradigm». This paradigm says that we should approach many major life decisions «as personal matters where a central feature of what is at stake is what it will be like for us to experience the outcomes of our acts, and where the subjective value we assign to an outcome depends upon what we care about, whatever that might be».<sup>11</sup> As I understand her, the cases where we should rely on subjective values are those in which objective values can be put aside (perhaps because the outcomes do not differ much in overall objective value).

This means that her discussion risks having quite a limited applicability since it is not clear that there are many cases left once we have excluded objective values. There do not seem to be many cases of life-changing decisions in which we can sensibly say that we will chose to lead a certain life because we wanted to see what it would be like. "I chose to become a parent because I wanted know how it felt to be a parent", "I chose to join the

war because I wanted to know how it felt to fight in a war”, and “I chose to become a vampire because I wanted to know how it felt to live as a vampire” are all statements that would sound frivolous and self-absorbed in most cases. In contrast, to say that we chose to try durian because we wanted to know how it tastes seems perfectly acceptable.

The paradigm Paul alludes to sounds familiar if one thinks about how typical agents care about their own future pleasure or pain. We want to know what a future experience feels like so we can decide whether it will be pleasant or painful. But Paul has in mind something that goes beyond pleasure and pain. Subjective values, according to her, are not merely values of pleasure and pain. Instead, «they can be grounded by more than merely qualitative or sensory characteristics, as they may also arise from nonsensory phenomenological features of experiences, especially rich, developed experiences that embed a range of mental states, including beliefs, emotions, and desires». <sup>12</sup> One problem with this characterization of subjective values is that they are both supposed to “depend on” what we care about and be “grounded by” sensory and non-sensory phenomenological features. But it is not clear how we are supposed to understand this double nature of subjective values.

One option is that it is the agent’s responses that call the shots: an outcome (or a part thereof) has subjective value for an agent if and only if the agent cares about it in virtue of some of its sensory or non-sensory phenomenal features. The agent is not required to care about any particular phenomenal features. On this view, subjective value depends on what we care about, since if we do not care about an outcome it lacks value for us. Subjective value is also grounded in phenomenal features in the sense that if we care about an outcome *in virtue of* such features, it has subjective value. The more the agent cares about it, the more subjective value it has, which can be, but need not be, a matter of the agent caring more when the in-

tensity of some phenomenal feature is greater. Since the phenomenal feature need not be sensory, the agent may care about the non-sensory phenomenal features of finally *discovering* how intense the taste of durian may be, assuming that these discoveries themselves have phenomenal features. So, discoveries can have subjective value for the agent.

This response-dependent notion of subjective values does not square well with other parts of Paul’s account, however. First, as explained above, Paul’s own solution to the problem of transformative choice is to assign subjective value to revelations, which, on the response-dependent model, means that the agent is simply assumed to care about the non-sensory phenomenal features of the *discovery* of having a certain experience, not taking into account the phenomenological features of the experience itself, which are supposed to be unknown to her. But many normal agents do not care about such things (I myself being one). We must distinguish the phenomenological features of the objects of knowledge – the taste experience of eating a durian – from the phenomenological features of the knowledge state itself (without its object). What is common is that people want to know how a certain culinary item tastes (a durian, for instance); but they do not care about how the *knowledge* of this experience itself feels.

Of course, Paul could claim that even though we often do not in fact care about the phenomenological features of these epistemic states we are nevertheless *rationally required* to do so. But this is hardly part of our cultural paradigm of rational decision-making. After all, we do not teach our children to care about the phenomenological features of discoveries as such. What we might do is to teach them to be more daring and explore various new taste experiences in safe environments. Finally, there might not be anything here for us to care about, since it is questionable whether these epistemic states themselves (without taking into account their objects) have any distinct phenomono-

logical features at all.

Second, Paul's claim that in order to know the subjective value of a future experience you *must* have already experienced it seems false, if the agent's responses call the shots. In order to know its subjective value, you only need to know that you will respond to this experience on the basis of some of its phenomenal features. You need not now know what these features are like. For example, in order to know that the experience of being a vampire will have subjective value for you, you do not need to know now what it is like to be a vampire; you only need to know that you will like the experience of being a vampire in virtue of some of its phenomenal features.

It is true, as Paul repeatedly points out, that you may not know how or how strongly you will respond to your future experiences. You may not know whether you will like or dislike your vampire experiences, for example. But this problem seems not to be of the same severity as the original one, and definitely of a different kind. Rational choice as Paul herself defines it, is about maximizing *expected* subjective value on the basis of evidentially supported credences. In order to do this, we need to have an evidentially supported credence distribution over alternative hypotheses about whether and how much your future self will like or dislike its experiences. The fact that the agent does not know which of these hypotheses will be true is not relevant for the possibility of rational choice.

The other interpretation of subjective value denies that the agent's responses call the shots; phenomenological features of outcomes can in their own right contribute to subjective value. At times, Paul says things that suggest this response-independent interpretation. She claims, for instance, that the subjective value of the outcome of eating a durian is partially a matter of the phenomenal intensity of what it is like for you to taste a durian, and «so the magnitude of the positive or negative value is not just determined by the fact that the durian tastes good (or bad) to you, but by how intense your taste

experience is». <sup>13</sup> Similarly, when discussing the option of becoming a vampire, Paul claims that it is possible that the *phenomenal intensity* of the experience of becoming a vampire will swamp the phenomenal intensity of the experiences in other outcomes. <sup>14</sup>

This is a very controversial view of value, to say the least, and is hardly part of our cultural paradigm about how to assess possible lives. It is not even part of the cultural paradigm about how to assess wines. Not even wine connoisseurs, who think that there are wines that we *ought* to like even if we do not find them at all pleasing, think that this value is improved whenever some aspect of the tasting experience becomes more intense. The best wine is not the one with the most intense acidity, sweetness, and tannins. What matters most is the balance of the wine – how the various taste elements come together.

Paul could reply by saying that the wine example I gave is close to what she had in mind, except that we should consider non-sensory phenomenal features as well, and that it was therefore a mistake to focus on the sheer intensity of experiences. The idea would then be that an outcome (or a part thereof) has subjective value for an agent if and only if the agent cares about it in virtue of a certain combination (possibly very complex) of sensory and non-sensory phenomenal features. These features go beyond pain and pleasure, likes and dislikes, and it is not just a matter of the intensity of the features. It is not up to the agent to decide which features those are and what the right combination is.

Again, it is very doubtful that this is part of our cultural paradigm about how to assess outcomes, however. It is true, as Paul points out, that we often use “mental simulation” in deliberations, whereby we project ourselves into our possible future outcomes and try to assess “what they would be like”. But, typically, we do this in order to predict how we would act, react, and how much pleasure and pain we would feel. It would be reading far too much into this method to understand it

as a way of identifying some complex combination of phenomenal properties, which are supposed to go beyond pain and pleasure and our likes and dislikes, that in part makes the outcome valuable. At least, this use of the method is not typical. It would only be useful for *texture fetishists*, who think that the experiential texture itself, independently of whether it is painful or pleasant, liked or disliked, contributes to the value of outcomes. They deserve the name “fetishist” since even if such a person were to consult a crystal ball that informed him exactly how happy and wealthy he will be if he becomes a parent, how it will affect his career, how pleasant or unpleasant it will be, how happy the child will be, and so on, he would not be able to assess the outcome of being a parent, since he still lacks information about the *exact* texture of becoming a parent. I think it is safe to say that such persons are rare, and also that there is not a general rational requirement to become one.<sup>15</sup>

Even if I am wrong about this, this interpretation of subjective values seems to make Paul’s own solution problematic. Note that even on this interpretation, subjective value depends in part on what we care about, but that means that bringing in the subjective value of revelation is no solution if the agent happens *not* to care about how revelations feel. So, we are back to the problem of having to insist that we are rationally required to care about how revelations feel. Furthermore, since subjective value is in part defined by some combination of phenomenal properties and it is not up to the agent to decide what this combination will be, we need to know the phenomenal features that in part make revelations valuable. But what are they and how can we know them?

Finally, if we go for this account of subjective value, there does not seem to be any need to bring in the subjective value of revelations. After all, when we are purchasing wine so that we can enjoy a good wine but don’t have the ability to taste it in advance, it seems very sensible to rely on the advice of wine connoisseurs whose judgements we

trust and who know what kinds of wine we tend to enjoy. They might of course disagree among themselves, but we can still consider various hypotheses regarding who is likely to be right, and give more credence to the ones we trust more. The same approach could be used for life choices, assuming with Paul that they are similar to wine choices.

The main upshots of this are that (a) on both interpretations, Paul has to assume that we are rationally required to care about the phenomenal feel of revelations of experiences, which seems very implausible and definitely not part of our cultural paradigm about rational decision-making, and that (b) on neither interpretation of subjective value will the agent necessarily be stuck in her decision-making for she can entertain different hypotheses about subjective value without having to have experienced those values herself.

Paul would resist (b), partly because she thinks that the agent will not be able to assign epistemically reasonable credences to these hypotheses about subjective value. Since the agent cannot rely on first-hand knowledge of the experience, she has to rely on *third-personal* information. Paul points out, however, that relying on third-personal information is problematic because there might not be any robust information to go by.<sup>16</sup> Paul is surely right to remind us about this problem, but some pieces of information can be better than none. Take the example of parenthood. While she might be right in claiming that one cannot know for sure how parenthood will affect one’s desires and beliefs,<sup>17</sup> one can at least form informed expectations by talking to those who have already gone through the transformation and by reading the relevant empirical literature.<sup>18</sup> The same can be said about the impact of parenthood on career prospects and happiness (or subjective well-being). Paul is, of course, correct in pointing out that these statistics won’t tell anyone for sure how happy they will be as a parent (or what that happiness or misery will “feel like”), or how it will affect their career. But by complimenting da-



ta about the average effects on people sufficiently similar to oneself with information gained by asking people one trusts how parenthood affected them – and, perhaps more importantly, *why* it affected them the way it did – one can certainly form informed and reasonable expectations about the effects parenthood will have on one's career and subjective well-being. These expectations can then help one decide whether one's desires are best served by becoming a parent or by remaining childfree. In any case, much more needs to be said to show that this problem makes it *impossible* to have epistemically reasonable credences about your future subjective values.

Paul has another argument against relying on third-personal information, namely, that it would threaten our *autonomy* or *authenticity* as agents. She gives the example of Sally, who has always believed that having a child will make her happy and fulfilled, but decides not to have a child just because empirical evidence suggests that remaining childless would maximize her expected subjective well-being.<sup>19</sup> Paul claims that her choice would be “bizarre” and that she would be «giving up autonomy for the sake of rationality».<sup>20</sup> It is not clear why Paul thinks this. If Sally wants to have a child because she believes that it would make her happy and maximize her expected subjective well-being and is informed that having a child would not maximize her expected subjective well-being, why would it be bizarre and a sacrifice of autonomy for her to choose to remain childless? She is just making use of relevant empirical information to make a choice on the basis of her preference for happiness and future subjective values. As Paul herself points out, “rational authenticity” is about making the best decisions one can in order to fulfil one's dreams and aspirations<sup>21</sup> and that is exactly what Sally is doing by making use of relevant empirical information. Paul must have in mind a very different Sally, one that has no prior preference about whether to have a child but decides to remain childless just because some social scientist told her to, where

the social scientist thinks she should not have a child because it would not maximize her expected subjective well-being. That would be a rather bizarre behaviour and also a sacrifice of autonomy, but this would of course go way beyond making use of third-personal empirical evidence – it would be to give someone else control over your future.

Another problem for response-involving subjective values, whether the responses call the shots or not, is that it seems that we can have conflicts between responses. As Paul points out, my response now towards a future experience, which I already know first-hand (or the response I would now have if I knew the experience first-hand), need not agree with my future response towards the same future experience.<sup>22</sup> I am not sure this is a major problem, however, if we put aside cases where our fundamental preferences change, for this means that we are not talking about conflicts of *ideals* here, only conflicts between responses towards the “feel and flavour” of a certain life in cases where we can safely put aside important objective values such as moral and prudential values. But normal agents do not seem to have *unconditional* attitudes towards the feel and flavour of their lives when no important values are at stake. For example, now being a fermented cabbage lover, I favour my future experience of eating fermented cabbage *on the condition* that I will later still favour it. To use Parfit's term, these favourings are *conditional on their own persistence*. In contrast, when my favouring expresses an ideal, I favour being honest, healthy, and prudent in the future even if I will later lack any concern for these things. Something like this distinction is implicitly assumed in the old joke “It is a good thing I do not like fermented cabbage because if I did I would eat something I hate”.

So far, I have questioned Paul's use of subjective values in rational decision-making. But let us now assume that Paul is right about the following things: (a) rational choice, in many life choice cases, has to do with maximizing expected subjective value, (b) we need

to know first-hand the phenomenal features of an experience in order to know its subjective value, (c) revelations have their own phenomenology. Even if these controversial claims are granted, it is still not clear that her own solution works. Remember that the idea is to invoke the subjective value of revelations. But in order to do this the agent needs to already know this subjective value. Otherwise the reframing of the decision situation in terms of revelations would be of no use. But if I have not yet had a certain experience, how can I know how it feels to have the *revelation* of that experience? If I do not know how it feels to have the revelation, I do not know its subjective value and we are back where we started.

There are two main responses Paul could make. She could say that the phenomenology of revelation is to a sufficiently large extent *invariant* with the object of the revelation. However, it is difficult to see why this must be true. For example, at least to me who has tried both, coming to know how vegemite tastes seems phenomenologically quite different from coming to know what it is like to be a parent. Indeed, it is difficult for Paul to deny this possible variance, since she adopts an expansive account of phenomenology, according to which the phenomenology of an experience may depend on its content. So two epistemic experiences with very different contents – i.e., coming to know very different experiences – cannot be assumed to have the same phenomenology.<sup>23</sup> But if this cannot be assumed, nothing is gained in terms of helping the agent decide, for instance, whether to have a child or not, by reformulating the choice as one between having or foregoing the experience of the revelation in question. For just as he cannot determine the subjective value of being a parent, so he cannot determine the subjective value of experiencing the revelation that parenthood brings with it.<sup>24</sup>

The other response is to say that the phenomenology is *different* but argue that there are crucial phenomenological similarities between the revelations of very different expe-

riences. Even if the subjective value of revelations is somehow grounded in their intrinsic phenomenal features, they need not be grounded in all such features. So, in order to know the relevant aspects of the experience of a certain revelation, you need not have had this experience in all its phenomenal detail and richness. You only need to know what this experience is like in certain respects, which you might already have encountered in the revelatory experiences you have already had. With this knowledge, you can extrapolate from your past experience to the new future experience. But exactly the same move could be made for the experiences that are the *objects* of the revelation. Not all phenomenal features of becoming a parent are relevant for its subjective value; only some are. Perhaps in order to (at least roughly) assess the subjective value of parenthood it is enough to have had experiences of sleep deprivation, strong attachment, love, and devotion towards a vulnerable person. Indeed, Paul herself suggests this kind of move in her Afterword when she talks about the choice to become a vampire. One can then wonder why we need to bring in the subjective value of revelations if it is conceded that we can roughly assess the subjective value of the experiences that would be revealed by our transformative choice. We need an argument that shows that it is easier to identify the subjective value of revelations than to do same for the experiences that are the objects of these revelations.

Of course, these problems would all disappear if we simply denied that the *experience* of the revelation must have value. Instead we could say that whether a certain revelation has value depends on whether the agent wants to *know* what it feels like to live a certain life – i.e., to decide whether or not she wants to be in a particular *epistemic state*. This way of understanding revelatory value seems to mesh much better with how we speak. When we are curious about how a durian tastes, we say that we want to *know* how it tastes, but we do not say that we want to

know this because we care about how it *feels* to know how it tastes. There are many different reasons for why we want to know how it tastes. Many are instrumental: we want to know how it tastes because we think it is likely we will like it, or we want to know this so we can tell others to try it if it tastes good (and we assume others have the same tastes), or we want to know how it tastes, even if it tastes awful, because we want to be seen as gustatory daredevils. But we could also just be interested in collecting pieces of knowledge of taste experiences, independently of whether it tastes good or bad. This account of revelatory value would be a radical break from Paul's framework, however.

First, this option goes against the “cultural paradigm” Paul adopts, namely that we should make decisions by performing mental simulations about what the future would be like experientially in all details, going beyond future pleasures and pains, and future likes and dislikes. To ask the agent to decide whether they prefer to be in a certain epistemic state or not is not to ask her to imagine how things would be like in all their experiential details.

Second, the agent Paul had in mind cares only about subjective values and thus gets stuck in cases of transformative choices. But the agent we now imagine cares (intrinsically or instrumentally) about *knowing* what something is like, even though she denies that this revelation itself has any subjective value. She might even deny that the object of the revelation can be subjectively good: “I know the taste will be pretty awful, but I want to show others I can take it”.

Third, since, unlike the texture fetishist, the agent we imagine is not stuck with values that can only be known by first-hand experience, she does not face the problem Paul starts off with: the problem of not knowing the feel and flavor of the alternative outcomes and therefore not knowing how to assess them. She faces instead the more familiar problem of trading the revelatory value of new experiences (“Do I want to *know* how it

tastes?”, “Do I want to *know* how it feels to live like that?”) against objective values, such as morality and prudence (“Is it *OK* to eat it?”, “Is it *OK* to live like that?”). To do this sensibly she needs to first figure out whether she cares about knowing a new experience for its own sake or for the sake of other things she cares about. If it is the latter, she needs to assess the likelihoods that the revelation will bring about the things she cares about for their own sake. Again, this is a familiar problem for all kinds of values the agent considers. The important point is that, for this agent, who I think is not unlike many of us, there is no need to reconfigure the choice situation. The revelation of new experiences is already one of the intrinsic or instrumental values she considers.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of this literature, see C. HELGESON, *Structuring Decisions Under Deep Uncertainty*, in: «Topoi», online first 2018, August 14th – doi: 0.1007/s11245-018-9584-y.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent contribution, see, for instance, E. KARMO, M.-L. VIERO, *Awareness of Unawareness: A Theory of Decision Making in the Face of Ignorance*, in: «Journal of Economic Theory», vol. CLXVIII, 2017, pp. 301-328.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent contribution to this debate, see M.-L. VIERO, *An Intertemporal Model of Growing Awareness*, Working Paper 1388, 2017, Economics Department, Queen's University – online available at URL: [https://www.econ.queensu.ca/sites/econ.queensu.ca/files/wpaper/qed\\_wp\\_1388.pdf](https://www.econ.queensu.ca/sites/econ.queensu.ca/files/wpaper/qed_wp_1388.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 113-115.

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p. 114.

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi*, p. 38 and 113.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. P. BRICKER, *Prudence*, in: «The Journal of

Philosophy», vol. LXXVII, n. 7, 1980, pp. 381-401; D. PARFIT, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1986; A. GIBBARD, *Interpersonal Comparisons: Preference, Good and the Intrinsic Reward of Life*, in: J. ELSTER, A. HYLLAND (eds.), *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, pp. 165-193; J. ELSTER, J. ROEMER (eds.), *Interpersonal Comparisons of Well-Being*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; K. BYKVIST, *Prudence for Changing Selves*, in: «Utilitas», vol. XVIII, n. 3, 2006, pp. 264-283; D. MCKERLIE, *Justice Between the Young and the Old*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

<sup>10</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ivi*, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ivi*, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> For more on texture fetishists, see K. BYKVIST, O. STEFANSSON, *Epistemic Transformation and Rational Choice*, in: «Economics and Philoso-

phy», vol. XXXIII, n. 1, 2017, pp. 125-138.

<sup>16</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, cit., pp. 88-89.

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 81 and 91.

<sup>18</sup> Paul may also be correct in pointing out that one cannot know, before becoming a parent, *what it will be like* to have the beliefs and desires that one will come to have after becoming a parent. But the point is that those who are interested in what new attitudes one will come to have, rather than what it will be like to have those attitudes, have access to vast evidence that can inform their decision.

<sup>19</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, cit., p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p. 105.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, p. 16 and 81.

<sup>23</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, cit., p. 12, footnote 16.

<sup>24</sup> In fact Paul seems in places to admit as much, see L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, cit., pp. 93-94.

SYMPOSIUM

# Experience, Transformation, and Imagination\*

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**Abstract** I'm going to generalize the points that L.A. Paul makes in her *Transformative Experience* and push them in a somewhat different direction. I will begin by talking about transformative experience in a generic sense and say how ubiquitous it is. Then I'll distinguish that from the strict, specialized sense of transformative experience that Paul identifies. I will say why Paul's focus on the strict and specialized sense allows her to arrive at a strong conclusion, but bypasses the more interesting lessons which concern the importance of *de se* imagination and the possibilities for educating it.

KEYWORDS: Transformative Experience; Laurie A. Paul; Imagination; Decision

**Riassunto** *Esperienza, trasformazione, immaginazione* – Intendo generalizzare le questioni sollevate da L.A. Paul nel suo *Trasformative Experience*, spingendole in una direzione differente. Inizierò parlando dell'esperienza trasformativa in senso generico, illustrando quanto questa sia diffusa. Quindi distinguerò questo senso generico di esperienza trasformativa da quello più ristretto identificato da Paul. Illustrerò poi le ragioni per cui la messa a fuoco di questo senso ristretto e specifico da parte di Paul le consente di giungere a conclusioni forti, evitando però i compiti più interessanti che riguardano l'importanza dell'immaginazione *de se* e le possibilità di educarla.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Esperienza trasformativa; Laurie A. Paul; Immaginazione; Decisione



You live like this, sheltered, in a delicate world, and you believe you are living. Then you read a book... or you take a trip... and you discover that you are not living, that you are hibernating. The symptoms of hibernating are easily detectable: first, restlessness. The second symptom (when hibernating becomes dangerous and might degenerate into death): absence of pleasure. That is all. It appears like an innocuous illness. Monotony, boredom, death. Millions live like this (or die like this) without knowing it. They work in offices. They drive a car. They picnic with their families. They raise children. And then some shock treatment takes place, a person, a book, a song, and it awakens them and saves them from death.

Anais Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin*, vol. 1: 1931-34

I'm delighted and honored for the opportunity to write about Paul's remarkable book. It is close to the perfect philosophy book: tight, clean, clear, and it puts a spotlight on something that is worth thinking about from a number of perspectives. It raises questions of interest across the disciplines and central to human life.

I'm going to generalize the points that she makes and push them in a somewhat different direction. I will begin by talking about trans-

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formative experience in a generic sense and say how ubiquitous it is. Then I'll distinguish that from the strict, specialized sense of transformative experience that Paul identifies. I will say why Paul's focus on the strict and specialized sense allows her to arrive at a strong conclusion, but bypasses the more interesting lessons which concern the importance of *de se* imagination and the possibilities for educating it. Paul writes:

An epistemically transformative experience is an experience that teaches you something you could not have learned without having that kind of experience. Having that experience gives you new abilities to imagine, recognize, and cognitively model possible future experiences of that kind. A personally transformative experience changes you in some deep and personally fundamental way, for example, by changing your core personal preferences or by changing the way you understand your desires and the kind of person you take yourself to be. A transformative experience, then, is an experience that is both epistemically and personally transformative. Transformative choices and transformative decisions are choices and decisions that centrally involve transformative experiences. [Personally Transformative Experiences] are those that lead you to change what you value and to what extent.<sup>1</sup>

She observes that when we see how epistemic and personal transformations work, it becomes apparent that many of life's biggest decisions can involve choices to have experiences that teach us things we cannot first-personally know about from any other source but the experience itself. She continues:

If the salient details of the nature of the transformative experience of producing and becoming cognitively and emotionally attached to your first child are epistemically inaccessible to you before you undergo the experience, then you cannot, from your

first personal perspective, *forecast the first-personal nature of the preference changes you may undergo*, at least not in the relevant way. If so, the choice to have a child asks you to make a decision where you must choose between earlier and later selves at different times, with different sets of preferences, but where the earlier self lacks crucial information about the preferences and perspectives of the possible later selves, and thus cannot foresee, in the relevant first-personal sense, the self she is making herself into.<sup>2</sup>

And she argues that this compromises the ability to make life choices in a manner that is both rational and authentic.

### ■ The ubiquity of Transformative Experience in a generic sense

Paul thinks that the ability to make choices at once rationally and authentically is compromised by the epistemic challenge of knowing what it is like to be that person in cases of transformative experience because the choice changes you in ways that are beyond your ken. Sometimes Paul speaks as though she is criticizing a particular conception of decision-theoretic rationality, and sometimes as though she accepts it as a characterization of what rational decision *should* look like, treating the epistemic problem presented by transformative experience as a lamentable difficulty with implementing it.

But anyone who has lived knows that uncertainty and the expectation of transformation are part and parcel of living a life for reasons that are entirely independent of the considerations Paul raises. Life is full of uncertainty of precisely the kind that means you can't control what experiences you have and how they will change you. Every single moment in your life is full of chance encounters that change your life in ways that you couldn't have anticipated in advance: The book you lift of the shelf while idly waiting for your mother in a grocery store at thirteen will change your

world. You choose a job, paying attention to the weather and the salary that will take you to a city where you find a new calling. Unexpected contingencies are part of the quotidian business of living and transform you in ways that couldn't be anticipated. You meet a man in a taxi in Chicago who later kisses you while explaining that he is moving to Australia. You kiss him back laughing, knowing you won't see him again. But you will move with him, you will learn to surf together, and your twins will have his eyes. You follow a friend who has Parkinson's to a yoga class to lend support, five years into your dream job at the CIA and three months later you know you are bidding your time there until you can afford your own yoga studio.

If by transformative experience, one means "experiences that change you in ways that you can't predict in advance" transformative experience is the norm, not the exception. Your assumptions about what you will like, who you will be, and what you will care about a year from now, or two years, or three, particularly when you are young, are hostage to things that you couldn't possibly know in advance and shouldn't be shy of embracing. The lion's share of uncertainty comes from the fact that the things that change us are the noisy contingencies that come from outside our field of view when we are making a choice: the things that are selected, but not selected *for*.<sup>3</sup> If you look back at the truly transformative episodes in your life, I suspect that none of them (perhaps aside from having children) satisfied Paul's characterization of transformative experience. If being rational in decision means an understanding in advance of who you will become as a result of choices you make, life is almost never rational.

I do not myself feel inclined to say that this is a lamentable fact we have to live with. It is hard to take seriously a model of rationality that says that we can't make a choice rationally if it will change us in ways that we can't know in advance. Living *should* be about transformation and genuine transformation involves uncertainty.

This isn't a new thought. Dan Russell, writing about what it is to aspire to virtue in an Aristotelian sense, says something very like this. He writes:

The choices that do most to enrich our lives are not choices of means to the ends we already know we have. They are rather ... the choices through which we come to discover new ends we might pursue ... we choose a career, or move to a new city, or meet a new person, not to become the persons we already knew we wanted to be, but to discover what persons we might become for having made those choices.<sup>4</sup>

I think he is exactly right here. Transformation according to plan is a shallow type of transformation, one that precludes evaluative learning. Paul says that there is no way of making a personally transformative choice authentically if you don't know in advance what you will become as a result. On the contrary, I think that remaining open to transformation of all kinds at every stage isn't a *problem* for living authentically. It is what living authentically *is*. To enter a marriage or a new job in good faith is expecting and being willing to be transformed in ways you don't anticipate.

Paul says that there is no way of making a personally transformative choice authentically because she thinks that in order for it to be authentic, the choice has to flow from you. But that is not quite the right way to interpret authenticity, if she means it the way Sartre or de Beauvoir did. Authenticity for them meant your actions should flow from you *rather than* from misguided ideas about duty or the obligations that other people try to impose on you, or by internal, self-undermining cancers like as appetite, addiction, or infatuation. It means that we should choose our lives *on our own terms*. Max Stirner used the word *Eigenheit* – "owning oneself" – which captures it quite well.

It *doesn't* mean that choices have to be rationally determined by a fixed character from which action flows. That idea goes radically

against everything that Sartre thought about the human being. And the idea that it should be rationally determined by your current values doesn't strike me as too much of a far cry from that. At every moment, you create yourself, and the creation is radically free and radically new. The fact that your choices are *not* rationally determined by the values that you had in place in advance seems entirely in keeping with an existentialist conception of authenticity.

### ■ The rarity of Transformative Experience on the Black-and-White Mary model

Suppose you agree that if “experience” just means the gestalt what-it’s-like for a particular person in a particular situation at a particular time, transformative experience is utterly ubiquitous. Everything that happens to you, and even simple reflection without any outward happening produces complex, holistic changes – changes in values, preferences, and utilities – whose effects cannot be generally known in advance. The dynamics that governs those inner changes has all the hallmarks of complexity: there are feedback loops, strong coupling among components, and non-linearity. The radicalness of the inner change is not in direct proportion to the novelty of the experience.

Some of Paul’s discussion (particularly in connection with having a baby) suggests that this is what she has in mind. But in other places, she is quite explicit that she has something much more specific and esoteric in mind. The official definition of a Transformative Experience is: an experience that teaches you something you could not have learned without having that kind of experience. She gives other examples: tasting vegemite, becoming a vampire, choosing to have a retinal operation that will give you sight after living to adulthood as a blind person. These are supposed to be «structurally parallel to a version of Frank Jackson’s case of Mary growing up in a black and white room». <sup>5</sup> What is characteristic of Transformative Experiences as a class is that, in her words,

«you can’t know what it will be like to have the characterizing experience before you have it, and if you choose to have it, it will change you significantly and irreversibly». <sup>6</sup> So these are new types of experience that are epistemically impenetrable in a particularly acute sense: you can’t know what they are like without having them. And if we take the model of Black and White Mary seriously, having them resolves any epistemic uncertainty. Let’s call this the Black-and-White-Mary model of Transformative Experience.

She focuses on these cases, I suspect, because at least in the book she seems primarily interested in the difficulty that the epistemic problem poses to rational decision. There is an interesting and well-developed discussion of the character of that epistemic difficulty in the literature on phenomenal consciousness that argues that the epistemic difficulty is absolute and insurmountable. So she can use the Black-and-White-Mary model of Transformative Experience to say that there is a deep and insurmountable problem with making the most important choices that we make in our lives. It was a very interesting philosophical move to link those two literatures, and they make the structure of the problem very clear. But it leads her to look to decision rules like “seek new experiences” to resolve the decision dilemma. One might wonder why this should constitute a rational response and she misses what is to my mind a much more interesting discussion.

By focusing on cases in which – by her lights – the epistemic difficulty is absolute and insurmountable, she suppresses any discussion of the capacity to imagine what it would be like from a first-personal perspective to do things that you haven’t done, to be in situations that you haven’t been in, to understand how new experiences may change and shape you, or to get a sense of what it would be like to walk in different shoes not for a day or a week, but for a year or a life. Those are questions we face every day and few of them have the structure of a Black-and-White Mary example.

And that means she sidesteps what I think



are the really important questions raised by her book. We are always making choices – big and small – that call on us to imagine what it would be like, from a first personal perspective, to do something we haven't done. What would it be like to visit Sweden in February, or Costa Rica in the rainy season? What would it be like to give a talk to a physics department or let our hair go grey? In high stakes cases, we need to understand what it would be to live a life different from our present life and the challenge is to try to imagine it from the inside. If I'm choosing between living in Tucson and living in New York, for example, or getting married or not getting married, the actual mechanics of thinking that through are very different from anything that is helpfully thought of on the model of tasting vegemite or becoming a vampire. It is not a total black box, and it doesn't seem to conform to the Black-and-White Mary model.

### ■ The great grey area in between

The literature on Paul's book has tacitly recognized this by moving away from the Black-and-White Mary model of transformative experience to something more complex and subtle and with a much more interesting epistemology. So let me back up and say a couple of words about experience. The quality of your life in a sense that is directly phenomenological and matters most when you have a difficult life decision to make doesn't depend on new types of experience of the sort involved in basic unstructured qualia like tasting vegemite. It involves something with internal complexity, and emotional content, and a much richer sense of qualitative character that captures the lived sense of what it is like to be someone other than who you are now. The case of having your first child is much closer to the sort of rich phenomenological character I have in mind, but there too, Paul emphasizes the insurmountability of the imaginative barrier because of the *physical* changes that come with becoming a mother, which she thinks puts

genuinely "knowing what it would be like" beyond the ken of someone who has not *had* the experience. She writes:

Having a child often results in the transformative experience of gestating, producing, and becoming attached to your own child. At least in the ordinary case, if you are a woman who has a child, you go through a distinctive and unique experience when growing, carrying and giving birth to the child, and in the process you form a particular, distinctive and unique attachment to the actual newborn you produce.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding Transformative Experience on the Black-and-White Mary model means that the ignorance is remediable only by having the experience. It is important for Paul's purposes that it is so, because that is what allows her to say that there is an insurmountable epistemic deficit that makes rational decision impossible.

But when one widens one's notion of experience to the rich phenomenology invoked above, it becomes clear that the phenomenon of not knowing what it will be like if you choose a certain path in life, is much more ubiquitous and, much more a matter of degree, than these cases suggest. And the wider class is not helpfully illuminated by simple kinds of qualitatively new basic experiences like tasting vegemite, nor is it illuminated by totally alien experiences like becoming a vampire. Once it is brought into focus, it becomes clear that the relationship between first-personal imagination and experience is more complicated, equivocal, and interesting than the assimilation to the Black-and-White Mary model suggests. And it becomes clear that we are *always* having new experiences that change us in ways that are relevant to what our lives are like for us.

I'm not the first to say these kinds of thing in response to Paul's book,<sup>8</sup> and a lot of her own discussion of examples like having your first child invokes this much richer sense of knowing what it is like. But the official defini-

tion of the class of Transformative Experiences (and the one that plays an important role in the discussion of decision theory) remains that they involve an epistemic deficit that can be overcome in no other way than by having the experience.

This matters a lot to the kinds of lessons that one draws. If we are trying to capture what actually what matters when one is trying to imagine in a first personal way the internal quality of a life, we need something that includes emotional phenomenology, patterns of response, and the historically shaped lenses through which one sees the world. These color every aspect of the lived quality of one's life. Experience in this rich sense has cognitive depth (layers of content, built up over time) and a profoundly path-dependent character. When it comes to the rich sense of knowing what it is like to be someone who has had experiences different from your own, the epistemic difficulty is there. But it is neither absolute, nor insurmountable, and overcoming it is not (in practical terms) a matter of having the experience but – at least in part – of imagination. By focusing on the Black-and-White Mary model of transformative experience, Paul passes over the philosophically important discussion that occurs in the more vast and interesting area between inaccessibility and ease of possession, where the imagination works – and works hard – to attain first-personal understanding.

### ■ *De se* imagination

People use the word “imagination” in many ways. There is debate about what imagination is, whether it is a form of knowledge, whether it is a single mental capacity, or a family of related capacities. I don't want to prejudge any of those questions. I mean “imagination” here in the specific sense of being able to imagine from a first-person perspective what it is like to be someone different than who you are now. What we are interested in is *de se* imagination of a kind that involves imagining from a first personal perspective being on the other side of

experiences different than those you have had.

We all have an imagination fed by a certain – inevitably restricted – diet of basic experience, and we have to form some idea of what it would be like to be someone different from ourselves. The ability to imagine what it is like to be someone different from you – i.e. someone who has been changed and shaped by experiences of a kind that you have not had – is important, moreover, well beyond its role in decision. It matters not just because we are faced with choices about who to become. It matters because we are faced with other people, who have had experiences very different from ours, and we are interested in who they are; what it is like to be them; what it is like for them *from the inside*.

Imagination of the specific *de se* type in question matters in human relationships of all kinds. It matters for morality, for fairness, for insight or comprehension. It deepens your understanding of the people around you and makes you better able to be a good friend, a generous helper, a wiser parent, a supportive partner. This is obvious when you are dealing with someone you love, but almost any social exchange demands some form of it. To interact with anyone as a human being, you need to understand a little bit about what things are like for him or her. This means not just knowing how the room looks from where they are standing, but also knowing how the situation seems to them in socially significant ways. You need to appreciate something about where they come from and who they are, because you need to know whether they might be disadvantaged or vulnerable in the situation, whether they might feel wronged, or grateful, or insulted or rewarded by how you behave. This chasm of (mis)-understanding was so painfully on display recently in the hearing surrounding the nomination of Brent Kavanaugh for the US Supreme Court. The hearing, which was broadcast nationally and seen by more than 20 million, included testimony from Christine Blasey Ford who described an assault by a drunken Kavanaugh 30 years earlier in which he pinned her to a bed, tried to tear off her

clothes, and put his hand over her mouth to muffle her cries for help.<sup>9</sup> It was clear that women listening to her testimony understood something that very few men seemed to appreciate. Men seemed to think that even putting aside any dispute about the facts, the assault wasn't *that* a big deal. People drink. Things get out of hand. She might have been scared but didn't get hurt. In their imagination, the whole thing amounted to a couple of inconsequential minutes when she was fifteen. Women understand that it was something altogether different: something much more horrifying, something to do with powerlessness and a loss of innocence, something about being taught your place in the world that comes with its own peculiar mixture of rage and humiliation. Women understand why we keep these things secret. Men do not.

If one is trying to understand something as complicated as the experience of being a woman, or being, for example, a black person in America, the challenge is not just to imagine what it would be like see something different in the mirror, or even to produce social reactions different from those you are accustomed to. The challenge is to imagine what it would be like to have emotions and beliefs that were the product of a history of experiences that are shaped by being these things. That goes back to the point about the path-dependent character of the phenomenology. A day outside the context of the life in which it occurs is like a note outside the context of the melody. It doesn't have the same quality.

### ■ Educating the imagination

If there really were no way of knowing what it is like to be someone different from you, except to go through the experiences they've had, things would be rather dire. But of course, it's not like that. The imagination can be educated, and the circle of experience can be widened, in ways that don't just depend on having the experience oneself. None of us is in fact confined to our own experience.

When you go through things with the people you are close to – e.g., when you live through the illness of a friend with cancer, or you live through the aging of parents – you live through it not just from your perspective, but also from theirs. Books can also play an important role. The English novel, perhaps more than any other artistic form, allows one to take a deep dive into the lived experience of other human beings from the inside. This can give you psychological insight not just into other people, but also into yourself. It can make you better at recognizing your own emotions and articulating them to others. It can also open up the imagination to ways of being far outside the range of one's experience. Why do we think that people in a bad situation (for example, immigrants or refugees) always want their children to get a good education? They see it as their ticket out not just because they think it will help them get a good job, but because it will help them see a life beyond their situation, recognize opportunities, create a life for themselves different from the experience of their parents. They know something that those of us who have started treating universities as professional training have forgotten: viz., that a strong and healthy imagination, nourished by a rich array of real and imagined people and worlds, is the best thing that you can equip your child with.

There is a huge variety of ways in which people educate the imagination, of course: travel, novels, seeking out not just new friends, but new *types* of friends. This kind of education is never finished and there is no single way to achieve it. Nor is it *easy* to *really* know what things are like for people different from yourself. One of the things that you learn in life is that your assumptions about the inner lives of others are often way off. Many people you think have it easy do not. Many people who seem to be gliding right along have suffered and are suffering. People who you knew when they were young and hip, and who now appear to be old and sad – saddled down with kids and jobs and houses – are happier than they have ever been.

As hard as it is to get right, the need to exercise *de se* imagination is unavoidable. The better you get at it, the better decisions you will make for yourself and the better equipped you will be to understand other people. The pop psychology catch word for this kind of thing is emotional intelligence. It is indifferent to whether it is self- or other- directed.<sup>10</sup>

I've never understood why the imagination – this specific type of imagination; imagining what it is like to be a person with a different history of experience – is not more central in discussions of moral psychology.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

In sum, then, I think the book is fascinating, but Paul's focus on the Black-and-White-Mary model of transformative experience was unfortunate. It made the central argument analytically clearer, but at the expense of steering past a deeply important philosophical discussion which is sitting right beside the questions she raises. The need to educate and to strengthen the imagination – in the specific sense of being able to imagine what it is like to be someone different from who you are now, someone shaped by experiences that you have not had – is important in ways that go well beyond helping you know whether you'd be happy in this life rather than that one. I hope others take up that discussion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Précis of Transformative Experience*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. XCI, n. 3, 2015, pp. 760-765, here p. 761.

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, p. 765 - emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> That is not to say you don't have some control, but the idea that you control your life in a way that is at least suggested by the picture of decision-theoretic rationality – where you have beliefs about the world, you imagine what different futures are like, and choose the one with the highest expected utility – is completely unrealistic. Lots of things will happen to you that you didn't choose, and it is hard to know what you will become. The

hours reading poetry, the failures and the small humiliations, the people that hated you, you don't know why, and the unexpected peace you find when you are in a desert; These things are your becoming. It will all add up to something, but you can't know what in advance.

<sup>4</sup> D. RUSSELL, *Virtuously Aspiring to Virtue*, manuscript.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Jackson introduced a Black and White Mary, of course, in F. JACKSON, *Epiphenomenal Qualia*, in: «Philosophical Quarterly», vol. XXXII, n. 127, 1982, pp. 127-136. See also, F. JACKSON, *What Mary Didn't Know*, in: «The Journal of Philosophy», vol. LXXXIII, n. 5, 1986, pp. 291-295. The argument involves a thought experiment that is almost universally regarded as establishing that there are certain kinds of knowledge – viz., knowledge of phenomenal properties – that can only be gained through experience. Mary is a fictional neuroscientist who «for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like “red”, “blue”, and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wavelength combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces via the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal cords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence “The sky is blue”» (F. JACKSON, *Epiphenomenal Qualia*, cit., p. 127). The claim is that she will learn something new – viz., what blue looks like – when sees blue for the first time.

<sup>6</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Précis of Transformative Experience*, cit., p. 764.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, R. CHANG, *Transformative Choices*, in: «Res Philosophica», vol. XCII, n. 2, 2015, pp. 237-282; E. BARNES, *What You Can Expect When You Don't Want to be Expecting*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. XCI, n. 3, 2015, pp. 775-786; J. CAMPBELL, *L.A. Paul's “Transformative Experience”*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. XCI, n. 3, 2015, pp. 787-793.

<sup>9</sup> Kavanaugh denied the allegations. The disagreement I'm pointing to is not a disagreement about what happened, but a disagreement about how much it mattered.

<sup>10</sup> The claim is nothing as simple as that reading will make bad people good. It is that it will make good people better at *being* good. It can also make bad ones better at being bad. If *de se* imagination can make you more sensitive, more attuned to the difference and complexity, better at recognizing what is going on in someone else, it can also make you a better manipulator, a cannier liar, and an all-around knave. What makes Iago *bad* is his malign intentions. What makes him *dangerous* is his psychological insight. But the link between morality and *de se* imagination is more complex than this suggests. Our failures to be good are often failures of the imagination in a way that makes us culpable. Part of what we owe others is to *recognize* their perspective, and that imposes the responsibility to try to understand it.

<sup>11</sup> The call to move morality away from rationality and towards imagination is one that Iris Murdoch made long ago. She used the word “perception” rather than imagination to emphasize that it can give rise to real knowledge. She writes: «I would suggest that, at the level of serious common sense and of an ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals, it is perfectly obvious

that goodness is connected with knowledge; not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certain and perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline» (I. MURDOCH, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Penguin, New York 1993, p. 330). The famous example she gives involves exercise of moral imagination. It involves a mother who begins with an unsympathetic and self-serving view of her son’s fiancé, seeing the young woman as undignified and uncouth, not worthy of her son’s affection. By forcing herself to look at the girl not through the lenses of her own social values and disappointed expectations, but through other lenses (those not organized around self-centered concerns, but framed – as Murdoch might put it – by love) she opens herself up to seeing the girl’s freshness and spontaneity and undergoes a transformation of vision that ends by recognizing her simplicity and goodness (I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge, London/New York 1970).

SYMPOSIUM

## Transformative Decisions and Their Discontents\*

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**Abstract** In this commentary we engage with L.A. Paul's *Transformative Experience* as it relates to decision making. We consider why deciding whether to undergo a transformative experiences can feel so agonizing yet also be so fun, whether people have any preferences to decide over in the first place, and who people even think they are.

KEYWORDS: Transformative Experience, Big Decisions; Preference Construction; Theory of Self; Mental Effort

**Riassunto** *Decisioni transformative e relative insoddisfazioni* – In questo commento ci concentreremo su come il volume di L.A. Paul *Transformative Experience* affronta i processi decisionali. Esamineremo perché la decisione se intraprendere un'esperienza trasformativa possa risultare così struggente ed essere altresì divertente; se le persone abbiano in assoluto qualche preferenza nel prendere decisioni definitive e chi le persone persone ritengono di essere.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Esperienza trasformativa; Grandi decisioni; Costruzione delle preferenze; Teoria del sé; Sforzo mentale



*TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE* IS AN IMPORTANT and engaging work on an important and engaging topic. One of its (many) commendable features is that it substantially engages with contemporary cognitive science.

We largely grant Paul her central arguments, and draw connections between her work and current research in cognitive science and psychology. In *Transformative Ex-*

*perience*, Paul identifies two related in-principle barriers to making the decision to undergo a transformative experience. Roughly, the barriers are (i) people's beliefs, preferences, and so on can radically change through a transformative experience, and (ii) it is impossible for people to correctly predict how the transformative experience will change them, and what they will be like on the other side of the experience.

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We think Paul is correct to identify these two barriers to making decisions about transformative experiences. In what follows, we wish to consider these barriers from the perspective of cognitive science. Specifically, we will examine: the particular agony of facing transformative decisions, the difficulty of predicting oneself in the future given changes in the environment, preference construction, and, lastly, the psychology of selves.

### ■ Difficulties with difficulty

Decisions about transformative experiences are often agonizing.<sup>1</sup> Accounting for the particular difficulty of big decisions is not necessary for Paul's argument about the irrationality of applying standard decision theory to transformative decisions, but it is worth considering in the light of Paul's argument.<sup>2</sup>

As a paradigmatic case of decision agony, consider Penelope, the long-suffering wife of Odysseus. Penelope describes her woes in waiting for her missing husband, while holding out against the suitors who compete for her: As everyone else in the house lies down to sleep comfortably, Penelope is «afflicted by some god with pain beyond all measure... [M]y mind pulls two directions – should I stay here besides my son, and keep things all the same...or should I marry one of them?»<sup>3</sup>

The decision whether to continue on as before or radically alter one's life-project is a wrenching experience. Many people facing a big decision find themselves trodding the same ground mentally in cycles, agonized and paralyzed. This experience can sometimes feel like working through a difficult puzzle, but is the difficulty of a puzzle the difficulty of a big decision? Penelope presumably will not reach a *eureka* moment if she only thinks about her choice long enough. There is simply the stark choice to be made. And when faced with the stark choice of a big decision, people often go out of their way to put it off or avoid it altogether. People delay, or drift, or dice decisions into manageable chunks.<sup>4</sup>

In considering the source of the agony of

big decisions, it helps to imagine a decision-making machine (DMM) that has particular beliefs (encoded as, say, probability distributions over states of the world) and goals (encoded as, say, utility functions). Suppose the DMM follows the basic maxim of acting to maximize its expected utility under its beliefs, and can calculate its prospects given its current understanding of the world. We grant that Paul's argument of the irrationality of transformative decisions would readily apply to this machine: The DMM cannot adequately simulate itself post a transformation of its epistemic states, or choose reasonably a point that is past a change of its central preferences, and therefore cannot rationally choose whether to alter its own self. But would the DMM agonize over this choice? This is not a question about the phenomenology of agony, but a more focused concern of the sort that certain cognitive scientists busy themselves with: we want to understand the computational correlate of decision agony.

A basic amplification account would identify the difficulty of big decisions with computational costs. Evaluating a set of options requires keeping those options in memory, and simulating the resulting prospects of each option requires computational resources, memory, and time. And much as calculating the progression of a thousand stars is more computationally demanding than the bouncing of a single ball, so too considering a decision such as whether to leave one's husband or stay for the sake of the children may eat up a great deal of mental resources in spinning out and evaluating more detailed possible futures and sub-options within each future.<sup>5</sup> If this account is true, the DMM could also be said to have greater difficulty with greater decisions, to the degree that the machine is spending more computing resources. Such an account is tempting in its reduction, but faces several problems. First, there are many non-big decisions (and non-decision mental simulations) that can be difficult in terms of computing resources but carry hardly any agony to them: One's mind

may be taxed computationally by which of 300 urns to choose in a convoluted math riddle, but solving riddles can be enjoyable and fun even if mentally challenging. Second, many of the paradigmatic cases of big decisions are simple and stark, but still carry agony. Penelope's mind tugs two directions, not two thousand. The pro-and-con list for each option can also be rather short. The torment is not the memory cost of keeping the options and their features in mind, but bringing them to mind at all.

A different and more naive kind of amplification account would suggest that the difficulty of making a big decision is directly tied to the consequences of the decision: A game involving big sums weighs on the mind more heavily than a bet over a nickel. Changing the self certainly seems like large consequence, so there's agony to match. However, this account also presents problems. We can construct situations with big consequences but little mind-wrecking in their reckoning. Consider a game of selecting one of two identical doors to open, where some amount of gold is behind one door, and a pile of straw is hidden behind the other, but you have no idea which door is which.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing to evaluate in this choice, as far as standard rational planning goes given that the connection between action and reward is unknown, and one simply picks a door, no matter the amount of gold.

There may certainly be added agony and projected regret in imagining a future in which one selects the wrong door, in that the unpleasantness of not winning the gold is larger than the pleasantness of winning the gold.<sup>7</sup> Such an explanation would sit *on top of* the fact that big stakes are involved. That is, it is not that large stakes are identified with agony in and of themselves, but rather that they lead to certain operations, such as simulating futures, with some of those futures being painful to hold in mind. But big decisions can involve simulating alternative futures that are all beneficial, while still being tormenting. Do I want to keep with tradition and become a monk in

my father's buddhist monastery, or strike out on my own and to become a successful corporate lawyer? Neither option is negative per se, both might be tempting, but their juxtaposition creates the problem.

Instead of super-sizing the troubles of ordinary decisions, we may find decision agony lurking in what makes big decisions unique. As Paul and others argue, transformative decisions cause standard models of rational choice to break down. A "breakdown" account of the source of the agony suggests that the agony involved in transformative decisions is caused by the fact that while big decisions present themselves as if they are standard decisions, they are missing some of the key components needed for a standard decision-making module to work.

Think of the way a garbled nonsense sentence might be initially labeled for further processing by sentence-comprehension computations, but with this processing breaking down since the input is not an actual sentence. Perhaps a big decision presents itself initially as a standard selection scenario: it involves a set of alternatives of which one must select only one, and the alternatives have distinguishing properties that allow them to be evaluated. But past this initial stage, processing then breaks down. In this sense, the DMM might be said to be experiencing big decision difficulties, as it would hum along just fine for standard decisions but return an error when processing a big decision. For example, this breakdown or error may happen because standard decision making requires commensurable options, whereas big decisions require comparing incommensurable options.<sup>8</sup> What dimensions or features can Penelope use to contrast remaining faithful to her husband's memory, with the destruction of his son's livelihood? Or perhaps, going back to Paul's argument, the breakdown may be that the DMM cannot rationally simulate what the consequences of selecting the different options will be, and recognizes this basic failure of its simulation.<sup>9</sup> But a breakdown account is strange, in that it pos-



its people may recognize the failure of their own processing, yet persist in this failure.

A deeper problem for both the amplification and breakdown accounts is that transformative choices can be a lot of fun. So long as we don't have to actually make them, that is. In previous work with Paul on modal projection, we asked many people to imagine making outlandish, life altering, transformative choices.<sup>10</sup> While not the main focus of that study, the great majority of people reported such imaginations highly enjoyable. Such fun poses a problem for basic amplification accounts, since imagining and making a fictional choice summons the supposed correlates of difficulty in a real choice but not their sting. This enjoyment is thorny for breakdown accounts as well. Reasoning through imagined transformative decisions should still cause a breakdown in processing (just as imagining reading a nonsense sentence should not lead to comprehension), and yet if any faulty processing is occurring, it does not seem to bring agony.

Imagining a choice and making a choice are not the same, but what is it about an actual choice that may drive the agony? Perhaps real consequences sharpen the mind and force us to summon resources we otherwise would not, going back to the simple amplification account. We do not rule out such a hypothesis, and it could be tested empirically, for example by having people lay out all their options and considerations in both a pretend-choice and a real-choice scenario. However, we think a different aspect of real choices may be in play: the fact that they cordon off the non-selected futures. Let us call this the gate-shutting account of decision difficulty. There may be intrinsic value and pleasure in having multiple possible paths still open for oneself, and a dreading of having paths cut off. The term *Torschlusspanik* (gate-shut-panic) is ascribed to the general anxiety that as time passes opportunities are flying away, but we may be even more reluctant to shut the gate ourselves. This account may explain why we delay and dither in a big

decision, putting it off for a month when we could just as well make it today. It fits with the difficulty of relatively simple big decisions, where all the options are known and all we are faced with is choosing and yet we cannot decide. It is in line with the fact that imagining a choice without actually making it is pleasurable.

Of course, any choice is a cordoning off of some options. In this sense, perhaps we are back to the amplification account: small decisions cut off a little bit of our possible future, and big decisions cut off a lot. But in the same way that big decisions are characterized as sharply affecting core beliefs and desires,<sup>11</sup> transforming rather than evolving the self, so too the mind may only consider decisions as cordoning off futures in the case of big decisions. The decision to snack on apples does not present itself to us as standing at a crossroads, forever cutting off the person that we would have been if only we had pears.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the accounts considered so far, such an abhorrence towards cordoning off does not fall out of a simple DMM, requiring additional considerations (such as a meta-preference over option availability), and suggesting that a simple DMM could not be said to be having big difficulties with big decisions.

## ■ Predictions and preferences

We now move to discuss two other issues in psychology that relate to *Transformative Experience*: briefly, the difficulty of predicting oneself in the future, especially given the role of the environment, and then, at more length, the construction of preferences. One way to read this psychology is as further empirical motivation for the difficulty of choosing transformative experiences. Another way to read this psychology, made salient by Paul's work, is that even non-transformative decisions are more difficult than we might have thought. We don't intend to give anything like a comprehensive review of even the parts of psychology that we discuss. Our

intent, instead, is to describe one or two relevant experiments to give a flavor of the kind of work being done.

Paul points in *Transformative Experience* to some of the work on failures of affective forecasting, and it's certainly true that people sometimes systematically fail to predict their future feelings.<sup>13</sup> We here briefly comment on a feature that can make such predictions particularly difficult for transformative experiences.

People find it difficult to make predictions about themselves in different states,<sup>14</sup> but a large influence on people's behavior is not simply their own state, but also the environment. Post a transformative experience, not only are you a different person, but your world writ large has probably changed in dramatic ways too. For example, the people that you interact with regularly may be different, the demands on your time may be different, or baby crying may be suddenly interrupting your slumber.

The problem, however, is that when thinking about the causes of behavior or predicting behavior, people tend to overweight the dispositional, as opposed to the situational, causes of behavior.<sup>15</sup> People's (future) behavior not only depends strongly on the particular environment, but they have a strong disposition to believe that dispositions – rather than environments – should be the main input to their predictions. And when it comes to environment change, people probably do not have a good sense of how their environment will change post a transformative experience.

Psychology suggests that making forecasts about preferences is an extremely non-trivial ask, especially given changes in the environment. But there's a deeper issue with respect to preferences. One big theme that has emerged from work on behavioral decision making is that we often don't have a predefined preference between the alternatives that we are considering. Instead, our preferences are constructed on the spot.

Think back to your days as a student attending lectures. The professor announces

that they are going to give a poetry reading the following week. How much would you like to go to such a performance, and bathe in the sounds of "Leaves of Grass"? Forget making a fine-grained judgment, is this something that would be a positive experience or a negative experience for you? It turns out that for many people whether this experience is perceived as positive or negative depends on how the experience was initially framed. People who were first asked whether they'd pay \$10 to attend the reading saw it as more positive than those who were first asked whether they'd attend if paid \$10.<sup>16</sup>

Most psychology experiments do not involve poetry-reading professors,<sup>17</sup> but there are many other studies that demonstrate that people's choices change depending on the means of elicitation. The most well-known of these show that people's preference between two gambles reverses, depending on whether you ask people to choose between the gambles or indicate how much they are willing to pay for each gamble, demonstrating that people probably did not have a clear preference between the gambles before being asked.<sup>18</sup>

What should we make of preference construction in thinking about transformative experiences? One issue raised by preference construction is that Paul's account of transformative experiences assumes that people have preferences that change in a way impossible to predict, but this work suggests that people never had such stable preferences in the first place. This, of course, potentially makes transformative experiences even more difficult to rationally decide about. Some of Paul's worries about the rational account of transformative decision making may also rear their heads for non-transformative decisions preference construction.

## ■ The psychology of selves

Research in psychology tells us that preferences may be unstable or difficult to predict even in fairly simple, well-controlled set-

tings. But, Paul's *Transformative Experience* doesn't deal with the kind of choices common in a lab setting, such as between more or less risky monetary gambles. Rather, the choices are about the different selves that you might become post the transformative experience.

Much of the contemporary work in psychology on how people think about the self has focused on how connected people feel to their future self, and the implications this has for how they make intertemporal tradeoffs.<sup>19</sup> To give two examples, people who feel more connected to their future self exhibit more patience,<sup>20</sup> and greater perceived similarity to the future self is associated with higher life satisfaction ten years later.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond how connected people feel to their future self, a more basic question is how people conceptualize and represent the notion of a self. What are the important features that make up people's self concept, and should it even be thought of in terms of features? One possible answer to this question comes from Chen and colleagues.<sup>22</sup> In one study, they show participants a feature (e.g. your intelligence level) and ask what other features of their self it causes (e.g. does it cause your degree of shyness, your aesthetic preferences, your height), as well as how much their self would be disrupted if the feature is interfered with. They find that the degree of disruption is predicted by how causally central a feature is. They thus argue that people's self-concept is much like many other concepts, in that what matters is the structure of the causal relations between its features.

We think the existing work in psychology on how people represent and reason about the self is already potentially useful for philosophers thinking about such issues. But, inspired by *Transformative Experience*, we also believe there are many exciting empirical questions to be asked in this area. How do people think about distances over the space of selves? For example, people may be reluctant to change into a self that is far away from their current self, even if it's a wonder-

ful self otherwise. How do judgments about your present self in various states compare to judgments about your future self? For example, one can ask people for judgments about how different they will be in five years, versus how different they are when angry. How do people's beliefs about their self inform their decisions about whether to undergo a transformative experience, and how do such decisions change their beliefs about their self?

Given the difficulties involved in transformative experiences, we think it's appropriate to end with interrogatives rather than bold claims, but we look forward to philosophers and psychologists making progress on such questions. Don't you?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The question of what makes hard choices hard has attracted recent attention in philosophy, and see for example R. CHANG, *Hard Choices*, in: «APA Journal of Philosophy», vol. XCII, 2017, pp. 586-620. Here we focus on the question from a more computational cognitive science perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Here we treat big decisions as transformative experiences by definition, and see E. ULLMANN-MARGALIT, *Big Decisions: Opting, Converting, Drifting*, in: «Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements», vol. LVIII, 2006, pp. 157-172. Not all transformative experiences are decisions, however. Being forced into exile may transform you, but it is not a choice. Likewise, not all big decisions are agonizing. The decision to become a parent is certainly transformative, but many people may not find it difficult to make at all. We could argue that in such a case becoming a parent is not really a decision, but won't.

<sup>3</sup> HOMER, *Odyssey*, book 19, translated by E. WILSON, Norton, New York 2017.

<sup>4</sup> E. ULLMANN-MARGALIT, *Big Decisions*, cit.

<sup>5</sup> Regardless of big or small decisions, the mechanistic explanation of mental effort remains an open question. For a recent review of promising directions, see A. SHENHAY, S. MUSSLICK, F. LIEDER, W. KOOL, T.L. GRIFFITHS, J.D. COHEN, M.M. BOTVINICK, *Toward a Rational and Mechanistic Account of Mental Effort*, in: «Annual Review of Neuroscience», vol. XL, 2017, pp. 99-124.

<sup>6</sup> More specifically, this would be a situation of

picking (specifically picking-by-default), rather than choosing, and see E. ULLMANN-MARGALIT, S. MORGENBESSER, *Picking and Choosing*, in: «Social Research», vol. XLIV, n. 4, 1977, pp. 757-785.

<sup>7</sup> D. KAHNEMAN, A. TVERSKY, *Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk*, in: «Econometrica», vol. XLVII, n. 2, 1979, pp. 263-292, in particular p. 279.

<sup>8</sup> See R. CHANG, *Hard Choices*, cit., for both a review and critique of this option.

<sup>9</sup> E. ULLMANN-MARGALIT, *Big Decisions*, cit.: «We find it difficult to look [big decisions] straight in the eye, as it were [...] we may in fact be badly equipped to deal with opting situations. Infrequent exceptional and all-encompassing as they are, we can hardly draw on our own past experience or on the experience of others in resolving them. We recognize, as theorists, that big decisions test the limits of rational decision theory while we try, as practitioners, to extricate ourselves from them as best we can».

<sup>10</sup> See J. MCCOY, L. PAUL, T. ULLMAN, *Modal Propection*, in: A. GOLDMAN, B. MCLAUGHLIN (eds.), *Metaphysics and Cognitive Science*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, pp. 235-247. You know, like would you go with aliens on a voyage through the galaxy if it was perfectly safe but you could never come home again?

<sup>11</sup> E. ULLMAN-MARGALIT, *Big Decisions*, cit.

<sup>12</sup> This account does not extend to durians.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. as reviewed in D. GILBERT, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Knopf, New York 2007; D. KAHNEMAN, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Ferrar, Straus & Giroux, New York/London 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See for example G. LOEWENSTEIN, *Hot-Cold Empathy Gaps and Medical Decision Making*, in: «Health Psychology», vol. XXIV, n. 4, Supplement, 2005, p. S49-56.

<sup>15</sup> For a provocative survey of person versus situation and what people understand about them see L. ROSS, R.E. NISBETT, M. GLADWELL, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*, Pinter & Martin, London 2011.

<sup>16</sup> We have obviously elided many details. For these

studies, and for studies that address alternatives including an inference (of quality) account and possible demand effects see D. ARIELY, G. LOEWENSTEIN, D. PRELEC, *Tom Sawyer and the Construction of Value*, in: «Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization», vol. LX, n. 1, 2006, pp. 1-10.

<sup>17</sup> We're not sure whether that's a good or bad thing.

<sup>18</sup> The classic papers here on this kind of preference reversal are those of Lichtenstein and Slovic. See, e.g., S. LICHTENSTEIN, P. SLOVIC, *Reversals of Preference Between Bids and Choices in Gambling Decisions*, in: «Journal of Experimental Psychology», vol. LXXXIX, n. 1, 1971, pp. 46-55. For a wonderful edited volume on this subject see S. LICHTENSTEIN, P. SLOVIC, (eds.), *The Construction of Preference*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York 2006.

<sup>19</sup> For recent reviews of such work, see H.E. HERSHFIELD, D.M. BARTELS, *The Future Self*, in: G. OETTINGEN, A.T. SEVINCER, P. GOLLWITZER (eds.), *Psychology of Thinking About the Future*, Guilford Press, New York 2018, pp. 89-109; H.E. HERSHFIELD, *The Self Over Time*, in: «Current Opinion in Psychology», vol. XXVI, 2019, pp. 72-75; O. URMINSKY, D.M. BARTELS, *Identity, Personal Continuity, and Psychological Connectedness Across Time and Over Transformation*, in: A. REED II, MARK FOREHAND (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Identity Theory in Marketing*, Edward Elgar - forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup> D.M. BARTELS, L.J. RIPS, *Psychological Connectedness and Intertemporal Choice*, in: «Journal of Experimental Psychology: General», vol. CXXXIX, n. 1, 2010, pp. 49.

<sup>21</sup> J.S. REIFF, H.E. HERSHFIELD, J. QUOIDBACH, *Identity Over Time: Perceived Similarity Between Selves Predicts Well-Being 10 Years Later*, in: «Social Psychological and Personality Science», online first April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 – doi: 10.1177/1948550619843931.

<sup>22</sup> S.Y. CHEN, O. URMINSKY, D.M. BARTELS, *Beliefs About the Causal Structure of the Self-concept Determine Which Changes Disrupt Personal Identity*, in: «Psychological Science», vol. XXVII, n. 10, 2016, pp. 1398-1406.

SYMPOSIUM

## Reply to Symposiasts\*

L.A. Paul<sup>(α)</sup>

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND THE DECISIONS involving them are special. One reason the experiences are special is because of their epistemic inaccessibility: as individuals, we cannot accurately imagine and evaluate them the way we ordinarily would. This leaves us without an internal guide. We can't look within ourselves to accurately assess or forecast our response to the experience. So there's a gap in our model for how to make the decision: a hole where we'd normally plug in the value of what it's like to have the experience in order to evaluate it. If we can't know how we'd value the options we are to choose between, we can't make an informed, rational choice.

Can we fill this gap by relying on what others can tell us? Should we replace our internal guide on value with the advice given by our best science and the most reliable testimony we can find? Perhaps science can

think clearly where we can't, and guide us to act in the way that's most likely to maximize our happiness. In essence, then, can we look to the science to tell us what we need to know?

In one sense, yes. Expert advice solves the value gap problem, because it gives us information about values that we can't get for ourselves. In another sense, no. Telling us we'll be happier by choosing one option over another can help us pick the option that is likely to maximize happiness, but it doesn't do this by helping us understand what that option is like. For example, consider a congenitally blind adult who navigates the world well but who wants to have a retina operation. I can tell the blind man that if he becomes sighted, green will be his favorite color, but this doesn't teach him what seeing green is like. Similarly, I can tell a person that she'll be happier if she becomes a mother, but

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this doesn't mean she knows what being a mother will be like.

Knowing what your life will be like can be important when you make this kind of choice. Not merely because we care about the nature of lived experience. Although, for most of us, it does matter to us what our futures will be like – will our lives be happy? Will our choices make us feel fulfilled? – it isn't just this. It's also that making the choice often involves significant tradeoffs.

If the blind man gains ordinary vision, his ability to navigate the world will likely decrease, since his cognitive abilities and skills, honed over a lifetime of blindness, will not adapt straightforwardly to life as a sighted person. He will likely experience significant changes in his relationships with others, especially those close to him, like his spouse or his children. People will treat him differently, and their expectations for him will change. A woman with a thriving career who takes time off to have a child will likely experience lower earnings and slower advancement. People will treat her differently, and their expectations for her will change. Perhaps her choice would be easy but for the fact that she lives in a world where becoming a mother entails the likelihood that she'll experience significant career costs and incur heavy social and personal obligations. It is highly likely that she will have to give up something that she cares about dearly if she chooses to become a parent. (As Paul Bloom points out in his essay, finding oneself in this type of choice situation is especially common in the United States.) Even if, on balance, a person will be happier after being transformed, the choice may come with serious costs, and knowing the nature of the life you are choosing can help you understand why these costs are the ones you are willing to bear.

Moreover, this isn't the only thing you need to make sense of when you consider a choice involving a transformative experience. Trying to decide how you'd like your future life to develop doesn't just involve attempts to foresee what a transformative experience

will be like. That's because transformative experiences are special for more than just their epistemic inaccessibility: they are special because they change who we are. In particular, they change some of our core preferences, in effect changing the kind of person we are. So your decision also involves attempts to foresee what being this new "you" will be like.

This means that the edifice of our choice model stands on shifting sands: in virtue of having the transformative experience we've chosen, we change what we care about. What is right for us to choose will change in virtue of making the choice itself. The trouble here comes from how, on the usual story, when you make a big decision, you are supposed to base your choice on what you care about most. But if who "you" are changes as part of the transformation you choose, and this new you is impossible to know (from the inside) ahead of time, then this ordinary story fails to guide you through a crucial point of ambiguity. When you base your choice on what *you* care about most, which "you" matters for your choice? Who you are now? – or the mysterious new "you" that the change will create?

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In Paul Bloom's beautifully constructed dialogue with the vampire, he explores these ideas, focusing on how to draw on expert testimony and what we know from the experience of others when making a transformative decision. Bloom's argument with the vampire takes us through many of the relevant twists and turns. Should you become a vampire? You can't know what it's like unless you become one. So how do you decide, especially if you are unsure? If you attend to your gut feelings, you shouldn't. It's gross and alienating and foreign. You'll be happy you didn't do it. If you attend to the expert testimony, you should. It'll be liberating and wonderful and amazing. You'll be happy you did it.

This is the situation we can find ourselves in for many potentially transformative deci-

sions. In essence, when we lack the ability to assess the situation for ourselves, and especially when our gut feelings don't coincide with the expert advice for a transformative decision, how should we choose? Following Bloom's lead, we should remember that gut feelings can be misleading and not lose sight of the science that lights our way. So perhaps we should conclude that, when the expert testimony, or the science, tells us what will make us happiest in such a situation, we should simply choose that option. So: become a vampire, since vampires just love being vampires. You'll be fine.

Maybe. I agree with Bloom that if empirical research can tell us about what can make us happiest, we should listen. In particular, even if it can't teach us what the experience will be like, it may be able to tell us how we are likely to respond, or what we are likely to testify to afterwards. But: does this mean that, in this situation, the right thing to do is to just choose whatever seems most likely to make us happy?

Not necessarily. That's because this decision has a complex structure, one that requires careful scrutiny. There isn't a simple decision to make here, because there isn't a simple explanation for how the action will affect you. As Bloom's vampire observes: «you're in a situation where the decision you [will make] turns out to be the best one, even though, when you look at it another way, [you'll] concede it's the worst one». <sup>1</sup> What does this mean?

It means that, if you choose to have the experience, it will change who you are. This affects the way we understand how the decision "turns out". <sup>2</sup> For if having the experience is what makes you happy that you've done it, then there isn't an independent way of evaluating whether it's right for you. Think about it this way: everyone who has had a frontal lobotomy seems very happy and content afterwards. Experts predict that if you do it, you'll be happy too. But is this a good reason to have a frontal lobotomy?

Of course not. Now, the decision to be-

come a vampire doesn't involve a lobotomy, but if there is something about becoming a vampire that makes you want to be one, then the fact that people like you are happy when they become vampires doesn't necessarily mean that you, as you are now, should want to become a vampire. What the testimony tells you is that vampires are very happy to be vampires. That is: the advice and testimony of those who were transformed matters, and certainly applies to people like you, but it applies to people like you *who were reborn as vampires*. And you, right now, are not a vampire. Yes, if you were bitten, you'd become one, and it's likely that you'd be happy if you did become one. But right now, why should you care about becoming something so alien to you – a vampire that drinks blood? Why should you care about what some alien version of you – if you were so twisted as to choose to become a vampire – would enjoy? In other words: vampire testimony can apply to who you'd become. But right now, it doesn't necessarily apply to you, the person making the choice, because you are not a vampire.

Ultimately, what Bloom's discussion with the vampire brings out so beautifully and clearly is that we need to think carefully about the reasoning we are using to make a transformative choice, because it isn't just a choice about happiness. It's a choice about what kind of person you want to be. And this isn't something that experts, or even other people, should decide for you. There is a distinctive kind of authenticity that rational, transformative decision making requires of us, and once we understand this, we can distinguish between a merely perverse or gut-level rejection of what experts recommend, versus an informed rejection of a particular kind of life. As Cass Sunstein points out in his *On Freedom*, reminding us of Huxley's *Brave New World*, sometimes we prefer to choose unhappiness in exchange for the freedom to remain ourselves.

"All right then", said the Savage defiantly,

“I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat, the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.”

There was a long silence.

“I claim them all”, said the Savage at last.<sup>3</sup>

Authenticity, in transformative contexts, means you choose knowingly, with understanding. If you choose to transform, in accordance with expert advice, you don’t choose *merely* because you think you’ll be happy with your choice afterwards. You choose because you want to discover what it’s like to become that new self, that new kind of person. If you choose not to transform, perhaps choosing a path that will bring suffering and loss, you do so because you prefer not to be that kind of self. Perhaps you choose to stay much the same, to embrace your current self, embracing your current values. Or perhaps you find yourself choosing between transformative options, and so you must choose to discover one kind of life over another. If you are choosing knowingly and authentically, you choose knowing that the deep structure of the choice concerns the kind of self you want to become.

So a transformative choice, at bottom, isn’t just about maximizing happiness. It’s about deciding whom you want to be. If you choose to become a vampire, it isn’t simply because, after listening to the experts, you learn that it’s simply the right choice for you. Rather, if you choose to become a vampire, with full understanding of what your choice involves, your choice is explicitly one of reconstruction. You choose to give up your human life to discover the life of a vampire. Instead of caring about human things, you’ll

care about vampire things. You exchange life in the sun for life in the shadows.

And if you choose to remain human, it isn’t simply because you are being perverse, or failing to understand that as a vampire you’d have been happier that way. If you choose not to become a vampire, with full understanding of what your choice involves, your choice is explicitly one that rejects the self-reconstruction that is part and parcel of the act. You choose to keep your human life, and human cares, and reject the desires of a vampire life.

Once we see the structure, we can use it to better understand the kind of ambivalence some people experience when faced with big life decisions like whether to have a baby. The same way of understanding the choice is available to those who are deliberating parenthood, for, in essence, this deliberation has the same structure as the vampire decision. Should you become a parent? Perhaps you are deeply ambivalent. You’re told you’ll experience joy and meaningful love. Parents tell you they are so happy they’ve done it. Yet, especially if you are female, if you have a baby, you’ll take a career hit. Your goals of travel and success may become unattainable.

If you find your intuitions about how to choose being pulled in contrary directions, the inaccessibility of knowing what this life-defining experience will be like leaves you without an internal guide. But, as with the vampire choice, the solution is not to have others tell you what to do, or to unreflectively choose based on what psychologists tell you will make you happy. That’s because, again, the choice isn’t merely about what would make you happy. It’s about which future self you want to discover.

If you authentically and rationally choose to become a parent, you choose to reconstruct yourself and your life around your child. Authentically and rationally choosing to become a parent means choosing to discover a new kind of self, a new way to live your life, one that you can’t know until you actually become that self. Authentically and



rationally refusing to become a parent means that you choose to remain childless, not because you know what being a parent is like, but because you choose to keep your current life and to be your current self, at least for the time being.

This allows us to explain why we can reject the paternalistic idea that people who choose not to have children are simply unable to recognize what's best for them. Even if they'd be happier as a parent, they may reject this, choosing authentically to remain who they are. In rejecting parenthood they are choosing in accordance with their current preferences, in accordance with who they are now. It isn't that they somehow lack the self-awareness needed to recognize what they really, down deep, should prefer, or that they are being obtuse or perverse. Instead, they are authentically embracing their current selves.

And on the other side, those who authentically choose to become parents are embracing the unknown. They are opening themselves up to the joy and suffering and discovery of transformation, and willing to do the work of reconstructing themselves. They are not choosing to become parents because they already know what it will be like, or because society pushes them in that direction (this is a point of contact with Sartre and Beauvoir). They are not choosing parenthood simply because they have been told by the experts that it will make them happier. Rather, they are choosing it in order to discover who they will become, in order to discover what this new life will bring.

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This brings us to Jenann Ismael's characteristically deep and engaging criticism of my approach. On my view, the special kind of unknowability that transformative decision-making brings forces us to confront a basic feature of modern life. Even apart from the ordinary types of contingency that we confront daily, we must recognize that, for certain kinds of big life decisions, we cannot

know who we are making ourselves into until we actually take the plunge. If living involves this kind of choosing to become an unknown self, how can we do so authentically? Ismael presses me to make my ideas here clearer, and to be more open to giving imagination and uncertainty a central role in living meaningfully.

Ismael is correct to note that I am teasing out an element of authenticity that is different from the Sartrean concept. My concern is not, in the first instance, with determining whether your actions flow from your true self rather than some externally imposed authority. (Although, as I noted above, this concern arises when we contemplate the role for expert testimony in our decision.) Rather, my primary concern is with how we are to make rational and reasonable sense of our lives, and to expect things from ourselves, given the uncertainty and unknowability of who we might become. We cannot eliminate this kind of unknown, nor should we pretend it does not exist. Ismael says it very beautifully when she concludes «Living should be about transformation and genuine transformation involves uncertainty».<sup>4</sup>

In the end, I want us to embrace this uncertainty, to embrace knowing what we cannot know, and to embrace the discovery that comes when we choose. Authenticity in choice, then, means choosing for the right reasons, and in the right way, understanding that your choice may change who you are, in ways that you cannot foresee until you undergo the change itself. We should understand and judge ourselves and others in the richer and more subtle way that this perspective entails. In particular, in transformative contexts we should not always expect people to know ahead of time what they are getting themselves into, even if we still hold them responsible for their choices. We can then separate responsibility for a choice from praise and blame for an outcome, and allow that, in some contexts, a person couldn't have foreseen who she'd become even if we hold her responsible for her choice.

Thus, I agree with Ismael about the importance of understanding the uncertainty that transformation entails. I also agree with her that we should try to cultivate our imagination in order to better understand those who are very unlike ourselves, those who have had transformative experiences that we have not had. On this point, however, our views do not completely align. In particular, I am much more skeptical than she is about our ability to use our imagination to understand, from the inside, those who have had experiences that are very different from ours. I agree that we can train our imagination to do a better job than it otherwise could, and that trying to understand others is important. But I'm skeptical about how much we can really achieve here. For example, I do not think I can know what it's like to be attacked, or diagnosed with a terminal illness, or to lose a parent, without actually having had those kinds of experiences. (Ismael agrees with me, of course, that you cannot know everything important about what an experience is like in these cases, but I think she is more optimistic about how effectively we are able to imagine ourselves into such situations.)

I maintain that, without the right experiences, try as we might, we still can't use art or imagination to leap the epistemic wall.<sup>5</sup> Even with the best effort and will in the world, there is a crucial element that evades us. Novels, documentaries, and art can teach us much, and they do help us sympathize with those who have suffered. Yet, they inevitably and essentially fall short. We cannot use them to cross the boundary from observer of experience to subject of experience. They bring us important information, they help us, and yet, they are not enough to teach us, to really teach us, what such experiences are like.

If you doubt this, try telling a veteran that you know what it is like to have fought in Vietnam because you've seen a graphic film about the war. Or try telling a sufferer of breast cancer that you know what it's like to receive a terminal diagnosis because you've

read a novel where the narrator takes you imaginatively through that kind of experience. I think you will find that they will resist your optimism, and I suspect that you will also sense, intuitively, that there is likely something that you are missing.

So the epistemic wall remains. However, what we can do, following Ismael's insights, is to try harder. We should try to use our imagination to make us more sympathetic to the testimony of others and attach a higher credence to their judgments than we might otherwise do, were we to rely solely on what we can glean from our own imaginative assessments. In particular, because I suspect that the inaccessibility of the experiences of people who are very different from ourselves can be the source of epistemic injustice, we must work to correct for this, granting that they might have privileged access to the nature of these experiences. Once we recognize that there may be principled epistemic reasons for why we cannot, no matter how hard we try, grasp the degree and nature of the pain and suffering of someone who faces challenges quite different from any we've faced, we can improve our moral and practical understanding, judgment, and assessment of their acts.

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Ismael and Bloom encourage us to see transformation as part of life, and to see the value of it. I agree. Like Ismael, I also think that we should learn to understand and embrace the uncertainty it brings. If we do so, when we choose to transform, we can do so both rationally and authentically. Doing so requires us to recognize that we cannot always see forward clearly, but to accept this as an element of making the decision. This theoretical conclusion raises practical concerns for real world transformative decision making. How are we to do this? How should we approach these decisions?

The practical and psychological puzzles of transformative decision making are highlighted by John McCoy and Tomer Ullman's

incredibly interesting contribution, which points us towards new and exciting ways to combine empirical and philosophical approaches to the questions surrounding the metaphysics and epistemology of the self as it relates to decision making. They introduce a new puzzle: what's the source of the *decision agony* that (real life) transformative choice can bring? As they point out, transformative decisions can be agonizing when we confront them in real life. What's the source of this agony? How does this relate to the computational process of transformative decision-making?

Their paper brings out a number of new and fascinating points. They note how transformative decisions can seem fun when they are merely imagined, contrasting this to the difficulty of making them in real life. Moreover, as they point out, part of the computational task of assessing preferences involves the job of forming your preferences in the first place. If your decision model is incomplete because of the epistemic inaccessibility of the transformative option, you may not have the resources to perform your task.

To separate the phenomenological out from the computational, McCoy and Ullman consider a Decision Making Machine (DMM) that cannot deliberate using a simple, fully specified model.<sup>6</sup> Like an ordinary person in a real life case, it cannot know the right subjective values, so it faces an epistemic wall. It cannot make a rational choice if it must choose based on comparing what its outcomes would be like. Exploring the way a DMM would deliberate in this context can help us get a better sense of the computational tasks involved in making a transformative choice. In turn, this may help us to answer the key question: what is the source of the decision agony that arises in real life transformative contexts?

It's not merely that the stakes are high, because an ordinary high stakes choice wouldn't cause such agonizing in a person, much less a machine: It's not merely that it takes a lot of computational resources to per-

form the task. It's not merely because the DMM can't assign values to all of its options, because even ordinary people report that imagined transformative decision making is enjoyable to contemplate and engage in.<sup>7</sup>

The DMM thought experiment suggests that something deeper is going on. If a DMM wouldn't agonize, then it isn't a simple matter of computation that creates the difficulties. McCoy and Ullman suggest a plausible alternative: when a person faces a transformative decision, this creates, at once, the need to face uncertainty while shrinking one's opportunity to live different kinds of lives. Choosing to transform is choosing to cordon off future possibilities, forcing you to shut the gate on some of your possible future selves. Not being sure which self to give up, combined with an epistemic wall that makes you unable to see down each possible path before rejecting it, creates agony. When you make a transformative choice, you must leave these other paths behind, forever unexplored.

If who you are is in part a matter of how you'd respond to different possible changes in yourself and your environment<sup>8</sup>, we can see how the agony of decision making has clear connections to the philosophical questions I've been raising about authenticity and the existential dilemmas about whom to become.<sup>9</sup> Which selves can you bear to give up? Which selves do you choose to embrace? Which selves are too dangerous for you to allow yourself to even consider? These and other suggestions raised by McCoy and Ullman are philosophically interesting, and even more excitingly, can show us how to frame some of the questions surrounding transformative decision making in productive, testable ways.

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If the agony of transformative decision making comes, at least in part, from how a decision requires us to shut out possible selves; to shut away possible lives, then in contexts where we can't "have it all", the agony may be especially keen. That is, often, a

transformative choice involves important tradeoffs. It comes with a cost.

Recall our original examples of a congenitally blind man who is contemplating gaining ordinary vision, and of a woman with a thriving career and social life who is contemplating motherhood. In both of these examples, the decision is hard in part because the world is not structured in ways that accommodate these choices. If you are not congenitally blind, the world is organized around you and others whose dominant sense modality is vision, and so you don't have to make hard choices about whether you prefer autonomy to having the chance to live with your family as a sighted individual. If you are not a professional woman considering motherhood, you don't face the difficult tradeoffs that stem from the ways that contemporary women still can't "have it all".

We can now see the connection to Krister Bykvist's interesting and critical contribution to the discussion.<sup>10</sup> Bykvist, one of the founders of the contemporary discussion of personal transformation,<sup>11</sup> rightly situates my work in current debates over the nature of decision making involving known unknowns (sometimes described as "unknown unknowns"). For example, the possibility of developing an artificially intelligent agent (an AI) that could surpass anything a human could do brings many unknowns. How are we to decide whether to create such an AI, or if we do create it, what kinds of possibilities, opportunities, and dangers does it bring? How are we to control it? It's safe to say that at this point, we know that we don't know. Such an AI brings many known unknowns, and with it, many significant challenges for rational decision making.

However, Bykvist wants to separate my account of epistemic transformation from the discussion of personal transformation when discussing life-defining choices, hoping to hive off contemplation of the unknown from contemplation of self-change. Unfortunately, such a separation cannot succeed. Epistemic transformation in life-defining cases

is inseparable from the account of personal transformation, because such cases are precisely those where a profound epistemic transformation scales up into a personal transformation. It is because transformative experiences are both epistemically and personally transformative that we must attend to the nature of the lived experiences that they bring, that is, what the outcomes would be like, and consider the personal implications of decisions involving them.

A central feature of the dispute between us concerns the balance one should strike between the contribution made by our assessment of objective values as opposed to our assessment of subjective values. I think both matter: we care about both kinds of value. Bykvist disagrees with me on the importance of assessing subjective value for transformative decisions, pressing me to include more consideration of objective moral values when discussing transformative decision making. I take the point: I absolutely agree that objective moral values need to play a role in who we make ourselves into, just as much as I think they should play a role in the more ordinary choices we make every day.

My view is not that the puzzles of transformative decision making arise only when we can exclude consideration of objective values. It is not that we put the objective values aside. Not in any way. Rather, my point is that the puzzles of transformative decision-making arise because, for many of these intensely personal, life-defining choices, we cannot rely solely on objective considerations. They do not decide the matter, and so there is an important role for subjective considerations as well.

The importance of assessing subjective values can be most apparent when a person has to make a life choice in a world that has not been set up in ways that accommodate her situation, where there is no objective moral prerogative. Think back to our examples of the congenitally blind man or the professional woman, making hard choices in an unfriendly world, and recall McCoy and

Ullman's insightful discussion of the cognitive difficulties and decision agony with transformative choices.

We agonize over such choices. Why? Not because we don't know what the objective moral values are. When we agonize over transformative choices, the primary source of our agony seems to stem from our inability to determine and decide between our subjective preferences and subjective values. Not because the objective values don't matter, but because the objective values by themselves are insufficient to determine one path over another, and we care deeply about the subjective elements involved. In the real world, we rarely find ourselves in a situation where the objective moral guidelines point us clearly down one path as opposed to another, and in cases of transformative decision-making, we think our subjective preferences matter, for we are choosing whom to become, and whom to reject. Perhaps, as McCoy and Ullman's piece suggests, the essence of the subjective difficulty is that the choice requires a person to permanently choose between selves, to shut off one self as opposed to another. Without the ability to see into one's prospective futures, it can be agonizing to try to make an informed choice about which self to give up and which self to keep.

So the cases of transformative choice that I am focusing on are cases where a person must make a hard decision, one that has different subjective costs and benefits depending on what is chosen. When choosing, the blind man wants to consider the subjectively positive value of a life filling with things like being able to watch movies and sunsets with his family members when he decides whether to become sighted, and to contrast it with the subjectively negative values that come from losing his comfort and ability to successfully navigate his world. (Those who have grown up blind often develop keen auditory and proprioceptive abilities to navigate the world that are irreplaceably lost when they gain the capacity to see, and for various physical and cognitive reasons, the new visual abilities

cannot compensate for these losses.) He can't have a life that is sighted if he keeps his current life, so which does he prefer? When choosing, the woman who is deliberating over motherhood wants to consider the subjectively positive joy of having a baby in order to compare it to the subjectively positive value of having a successful career unfettered by family constraints. She can't have both, so which life does she prefer?

In these cases, a person must choose between different kinds of lives, giving up one kind of life for another. In such cases, it is natural to want to know what each kind of life would be like, that is, to know the subjective value of each kind of life one could have. These subjective values are not merely "phenomenological values, as such", but rather, values of lived experiences, the value of living a life *like this* versus living a life *like that*. To choose, irreversibly, one sort of life for the other, and to do so in an informed way, requires a careful consideration of the subjective values involved.

Moreover, the assessment of the subjective values of these experiences requires an understanding of their phenomenal character. As I argue in my book, experience teaches us how to value: the phenomenology unlocks the content for the knower. While we may be able to make a conceptual distinction between the phenomenal and the nonphenomenal, given the way that actual human psychology works, in cases of transformative experience we cannot have the requisite nonphenomenal knowledge of the lived experience without first gaining phenomenal knowledge of the lived experience. For example, without actually discovering what it will be like to stand in the identity-changing, loving attachment to the actual child I create (or adopt), I cannot know how I'll experience and thus respond to the various things I'll need to give up and the various things I'll gain through becoming a parent. (As every parent knows, reading picture books to a toddler or singing a child to sleep has a special kind of quality when the child is one you

love and cherish as your own. The experience is different, somehow, and more subjectively valuable, when it's your own child. This plays out, in ways large and small, for many choices in your life, for example, when you choose to read and play with your baby instead of completing an important work project.)

When a choice is easy, because there isn't really anything that central or important to one's identity that one must give up, perhaps we can treat subjective values as an indulgence, a mere gloss on what's really important. But a context where the choice is hard, where one can't "have it all", one wants to know what one is giving up in order to understand what is being lost forever. This is why caring about the nature of your lived experience is not mere "texture fetishism", as Bykvist suggests. It is not selfishness, nor an abandonment of objective moral values. It is, rather, something we turn to in order to help us make an informed life choice that involves significant tradeoffs. An attempt to assess subjective value is an attempt to respect the nature of one's inner life and the inner lives of others, so one can decide what to reject and what to keep, as responsibly and authentically as possible. If this sort of caring about the nature of your future is "texture fetishism", then it is the diagnosis for those of us who refuse to ignore human feelings and human sensibility.

In my work, I want to grant the importance of subjective assessment and subjective value to how we think about our lives and the lives of others, while denying that we can assess these values in many kinds of transformative contexts. But the solution is not to hide in our ivory tower, denying the importance of emotion and feeling in the hopes that this will somehow make us rational. Instead, we must face the difficulties, and look for alternative models, ones that allow us to embrace revelation, feeling, and the importance of discovery.

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To close, I wish to thank all of my critics

for their excellent, insightful, and impressive contributions. I'm honored to have such a distinguished set of commentators engage with my work, and to have the chance to respond to their thoughtful and penetrating remarks. I thank them for their time and care, and I am grateful for the way they have pushed me to think harder and better about transformative experience and decision making.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> P. BLOOM, *Arguing with the Vampire*, in: «Rivista internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», vol. X, n. 3, 2019, pp. 320-329, here p. 327.

<sup>2</sup> For related discussion, see C. STARMANS, P. BLOOM, *Nothing Personal: What Psychologists Get Wrong about Identity*, in: «Trends in Cognitive Sciences», vol. XXII, n. 7, 2018, pp. 566-568.

<sup>3</sup> A. HUXLEY, *Brave New World*, Chatto & Windus, London 1932.

<sup>4</sup> J. ISMAEL, *Experience, Transformation, and Imagination*, in: «Rivista internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», vol. X, n. 3, 2019, pp. 330-338, here p. 332. For a brilliant exploration of how to live and understand decision making in our natural law-governed natural world, see J. ISMAEL, *How Physics Sets Us Free*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. N. ARPALY, *What is it Like to have a Crappy Imagination*, in: J. SCHWENKLER, E. LAMBERT (eds.), *Themes in Transformative Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford - forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> J. MCCOY, T. ULLMAN, *Transformative Decision and Their Discontents*, in: «Rivista internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», vol. X, n. 3, 2019, pp. 339-345.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. MCCOY, L.A. PAUL, T. ULLMAN, *Modal Propection*, in: A. GOLDMAN, B. MCLAUGHLIN (eds.), *Metaphysics and Cognitive Science*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, pp. 235-247.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. S. MOLOUKI, S.Y. CHEN, O. URMINSKY, D.M. BARTELS, *How Personal Theories of the Self Shape Beliefs about Personal Continuity and Transformative Experience*, in: J. SCHWENKLER, E. LAMBERT (eds.), *Themes in Transformative Experience*, Oxford University Press – forthcoming: «First, people have beliefs about the structure of their self-concept – how the different personal aspects are causally related to each other. Second, people have theories about the ways in which their personal qualities will change in the future – how

they will develop into the person they expect to become. We propose that personal changes and experiences that are more inconsistent with either of these two types of theories are perceived as more disruptive to the self-concept, and thus more transformative».

<sup>9</sup> There are interesting relations here to Kierkegaard's exploration of rationality and the self through the lens of religious transformation. See S. KIERKEGAARD, *Either/Or: a fragment of life*, translated by A. HANNAY, Penguin, New York 1992; L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Religious Experi-*

*ence*, in: «Episteme», forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> K. BYKVIST, *Paul's Reconfiguration of Decision-problems in the Light of Transformative Experiences*, in: «Rivista internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», vol. X, n. 3, 2019, pp. 346-356.

<sup>11</sup> See K. BYKVIST, *Prudence for Changing Selves*, in: «Utilitas», vol. XVIII, n. 3, 2006, pp. 264-283; E. ULLMANN-MARGALIT, *Big Decisions: Opting, Converting, Drifting*, in: «Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements», vol. LVIII, 2006, pp. 157-172; D. PARFIT, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford university Press, Oxford 1984.