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SYMPOSIUM

Précis of *"Transformative Experience"**

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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.[1] 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, 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. But further, 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.

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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,[2] 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

[1] 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 Philosphica», vol. XCII, n. 2, 2015, pp. 149-170.

[2] 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.