

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 *Transformative 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.¹

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.²

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*.³ 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.⁴

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». ⁵ 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». ⁶ 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.⁷

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,⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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

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

² *Ivi*, p. 765 - emphasis mine.

³ 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.

⁴ D. RUSSELL, *Virtuously Aspiring to Virtue*, manuscript.

⁵ 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.

⁶ L.A. PAUL, *Précis of Transformative Experience*, cit., p. 764.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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).