

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Transformative Experience

L. A. PAUL

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What if someone offered to transform you from being a vegetarian to a vampire? Would you do it if the testimony of former vegetarians who had transformed into vampires was that they would never go back to being living beings if given the chance? How about if you were informed that vampires no longer killed for blood, but had evolved into more ethical beings and used blood banks instead? What about going skydiving for the first time? You hear from others who have done it how wonderful and exhilarating it is and how one must first experience it to know and understand the benefits one gets from it. Perhaps you hear that there are many people who were at first not too keen at all on doing skydives, but after the first one they just couldn't wait to do it again and again. Would you be rational to follow their example and go for your first skydive no matter how much you initially disliked the idea? How about having a baby, or eating a fruit you have never even seen before, such as a durian?

The main point of L. A. Paul's *Transformative Experience* is that there is no rational way to make a decision in those cases that are transformative. Your present self simply does not have the necessary information about your post-experience future self to determine whether to go through with the experience. Not only is it an epistemological problem, but it is also a personal problem, in that your preferences might radically change post-experience. In cases that are relatively low-stakes and probably not transformative, such as eating a durian for the first time, there are still epistemological issues. However, in the case of a woman deciding to have a baby, Paul is masterful in presenting her argument that using third-party evidence would be inadequate for decision-making. A person who applies third-party evidence without including first-person preferences is lacking authenticity. However, in transformative cases, a person's first-person preferences will have changed post-experience (that is the major reason it is called a 'transformative' experience); first-person preferences prior to the transformative experience thus should not be taken into consideration. So, what remains available pre-transformative experience is third-party evidence as to whether to undergo the transformative experience. This is not enough to imbue the decision-making process here as rational.

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Those who would call Paul's theory a subjectivist one would be mistaken. Issues of whether a person's first-person preferences are actually based on his or her authentic desires do not even enter the picture here. Additionally, it is not that Paul does not want to give third-party evidence any weight when it comes to decision-making; it is that it should not be the only input, since third-party evidence is just too coarse-grained. First-person preferences play a key role since it is a particular individual who is questioning whether to undergo a transformative experience (and the key here is *undergo*, which is of a phenomenological nature). It is by this very nature that the relation to the experience is a personal one. This first-person input, along with third-person evidence, would render the person's choice as to whether to have the transformative experience a rational one. However, the relevant first-person input which should be used to make the decision is only available after the person has actually gone through the transformative experience.

So, how is a person to decide if he or she should undergo a transformative experience, given the puzzle concerning first-person preferences? Paul suggests that it might be possible under certain circumstances to employ hierarchical Bayesian modeling to come to a decision. What this entails is a person taking a higher-order categorical approach to solve the decision-making problem. One of the examples Paul uses is that of a person who generally likes grapes but has not yet tried the bright orange grapes found at the local farmer's market (160-161). The person will make up her mind as to whether to eat the bright orange grapes for the first time by reasoning that she has liked all the different types of grapes she has eaten in the past; it could be said that this person likes grapes in general, so the decision to eat the bright orange grapes for the first time would be based on this generalization. This tends to work in low-stakes situations such as this one, and even high-stakes situations that are not transformative. How would it work in those high-stakes situations that are also transformative? Would a congenitally blind saxophonist be able to use the higher-order approach to successfully determine whether to have retinal surgery (167-172)? In this case, Paul suggests that it might be possible, given that the blind saxophonist could abstract the correct higher-order categorization structure gathered out of his other experiences. The blind saxophonist could then use this higher-order structure to accurately model the preferences he would have post-surgery; additionally, he also would have to correctly assign the values of the outcomes from the choice to have the surgery. This sounds tremendously difficult. Paul does present an alternate possibility (that she ultimately rejects) of modeling based on severe epistemic constraints; this leads to only thread-bare results that would not be useful in deciding whether to undergo a transformative experience. Paul's concluding notion is that the decision should be based "in terms of the value and the cost of revelation" (177). What it comes down to is whether a person values the *discovery* of what it is like to go through a transformative experience and to have the accompanying new preferences, or values retaining the status quo. Valuing revelation as framed does not give an indication that a person should value revelation. This is not a question that is answered (or should be answered) by Paul's book. With *Transformative Experience*, Paul has very expertly provided a framework that makes clear just how complex the process of deciding on whether to undergo a transformative experience is.