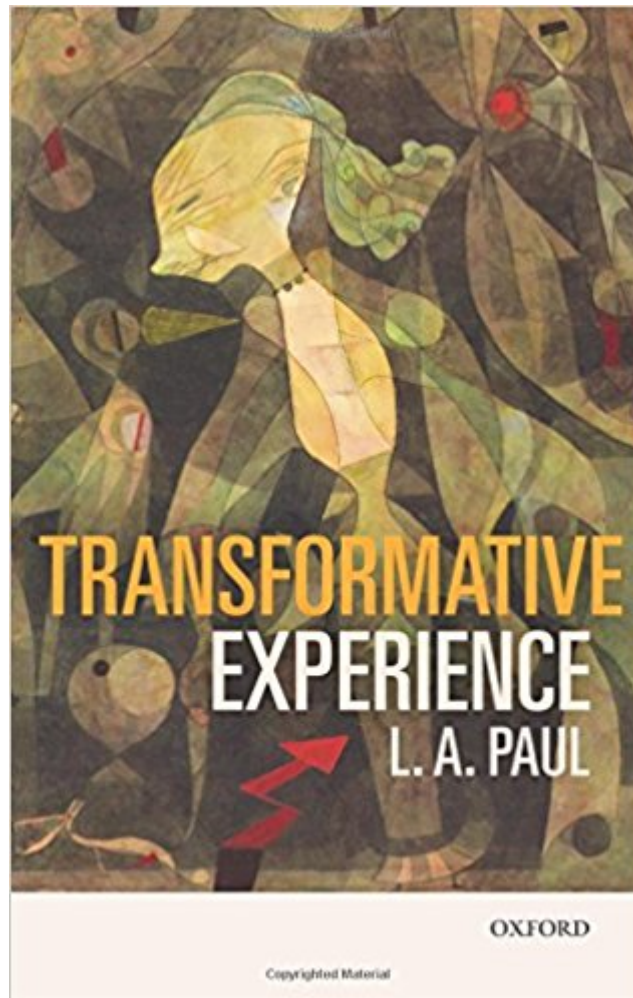




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Transformative Experience



Synopsis

As we live our lives, we repeatedly make decisions that shape our future circumstances and affect the sort of person we will be. When choosing whether to start a family, or deciding on a career, we often think we can assess the options by imagining what different experiences would be like for us. L. A. Paul argues that, for choices involving dramatically new experiences, we are confronted by the brute fact that we can know very little about our subjective futures. This has serious implications for our decisions. If we make life choices in the way we naturally and intuitively want to--by considering what we care about, and what our future selves will be like if we choose to have the experience--we only learn what we really need to know after we have already committed ourselves. If we try to escape the dilemma by avoiding an experience, we have still made a choice. Choosing rationally, then, may require us to regard big life decisions as choices to make discoveries, small and large, about the intrinsic nature of experience, and to recognize that part of the value of living authentically is to experience one's life and preferences in whatever way they may evolve in the wake of the choices one makes. Using classic philosophical examples about the nature of consciousness, and drawing on recent work in normative decision theory, cognitive science, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind, Paul develops a rigorous account of transformative experience that sheds light on how we should understand real-world experience and our capacity to rationally map our subjective futures.

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Consciousness & Thought

Customer Reviews

"This book offers a very rigorous account of the notions of transformative experience and rationally moving into the future... Recommended." -- Choice
"Transformative Experience hits the sweet spot: it's a significant scholarly work, bearing on deep philosophical issues, but it's also engaging and accessible." --Paul Bloom, The Slate
"It's a provocative, enticing book. It's an enjoyable read, accessible to both specialists in philosophy and non-philosophers. In fact, I teach it in my introductory philosophy classes...her work has sparked an explosion of interesting research." -- The Philosopher's Magazine

L. A. Paul received her PhD from Princeton in 1999, and taught at Yale and the University of Arizona before coming to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is a Professorial Fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

I'll preface this review with the statement that I am a scientist, not a philosopher. In fact, this may be the first philosophy text I've ever read (and I haven't finished it yet). I was attracted to it because of an interesting column written about it in the NYT (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/25/opinion/david-brooks-the-big-decisions.html>), and I made the uncharacteristic decision to purchase it. That said, I have found the book thus far to be intellectually and personally challenging. I have also found that it has helped me understand a transformative process through which I am currently going, which I doubt I would have understood, accepted, valued or loved had I not read this book. Transformative experiences don't come along every day, and by the very virtue of their being "extra-epistemic", can be easily feared, abhorred, misinterpreted, and the like. Yet, virtually everyone will have such an experience over a lifetime, and possibly many more than one. Having a deeper understanding of that process, such as can be gained through reading this book, can make a big difference at those times. I thank the author for her work, and heartily recommend the book, even to those who, like me, never quite understood the value of philosophy.

This is a curious book. It is excellently written, with a fine understanding of the philosophical problems arising from transformative decision-making - in other words, those decisions we come to that will eventually change our lives. Through a series of case-studies, partly frivolous, partly serious, Paul makes us aware of how difficult such decisions are, both philosophically as well as emotionally. The case-studies include deciding to become a vampire (or embracing the vampiric

spirit), deciding to have a child, and (for deaf people especially) deciding to have an implant so as to restore the power of hearing (or to make profoundly deaf people hear for the first time). Paul writes in the second person, addressing all arguments to an imaginary reader. This gives the book a personal, intimate tone that perhaps works against the complexity of the ideas advanced.

Sometimes the ideas are a little difficult to follow, especially for readers unacquainted with decision theory. Maybe the book can really only be appreciated by philosophers, rather than those seeking to understand what kind of decisions or ideas help to inspire transformative thinking. What really undermines the book is the emphasis on rational thinking. Personal experience has revealed that many transformative decisions represent a leap in the dark: we decide to change our lives without really knowing what the consequences might be. Such decisions can be bold in the extreme, but they help us develop strategies of coming to terms with new experiences and developing new ways of thinking that are not always based on previous knowledge, as Paul claims. Sometimes that previous knowledge proves unhelpful, especially when we compare the new experience with our previous experiences. These normally turn out to be value-laden comparisons that perpetually change over time. Sometimes the human mind is "unreasonable," prompting us to make decisions which we cannot explain, either to ourselves or to others. We either answer "I don't know," or "it just seemed right at the time." Such responses undercut the basic thrust of Paul's argument that we can find a rational justification for transformative thinking. We tend to let our emotions rule our brains, especially when these kind of decisions need to be made: sometimes we regret them, but on other occasions we are grateful that we set aside our reason and jumped off the emotional cliff instead.

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