Transformative Experiences

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Transformative experiences are experiential states that radically alter a person in some way, such as what the person can know or understand, their core values or preferences, their overall outlook on the world, and so on. Some notable historical examples plausibly include the Apostle Paul's epiphany and conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus, Saint Augustine's moral and spiritual transformation after the death of a close friend, and similar transformations by Buddha and Muhammed. There are numerous literary examples too, ranging from Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* to Zosima's transformation in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* from a life of debauchery to joining a monastery after experiencing all-consuming guilt from abusing a servant. Transformative experiences have also been long recognized to have philosophical importance, as evidenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's recognition in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007 [1947]) that we often make the most important decisions of our lives not knowing how future experience may change us. However, philosophical interest in transformative experiences has exploded recently due the pioneering work of L. A. Paul (2015a, 2015b) and Edna Ullmann-Margalit (2006), who argue that transformative experiences challenge our ability to make rational choices (*see* RATIONALITY).

Types and Varieties of Transformative Experience

One initial question concerns what constitutes a transformative experience. Paul defines an *epistemically* transformative experience as an experience that fundamentally alters an individual's epistemic situation, giving them information or knowledge accessible only by that experience. Paul then defines a *personally* transformative experience as an experience that alters a person's core preferences or values. Some argue there are also *existentially* transformative experiences – experiences that radically alter how one views or understands the world or one's own existence (*see* EXISTENTIALISM). Some suggest there may be *ontologically* transformative experiences, which change an individual's personal identity, making them literally become another person. Further, some have distinguished "event-based" transformative experiences (which are experienced passively) from "choice-based" transformative experiences that involve or are constituted by an act of choice. Finally, it has been argued that transformative experiences can come *in degrees*, transforming a person in the respects described above more or less along a continuum.

A second set of questions concern which types of concrete life experiences are or may be transformative. Paul presents Frank Jackson's (1986) famous example of

Mary – an individual who lives her entire life in a black-and-white room before seeing color for the first time – as a paradigmatic instance of an epistemically transformative experience, since Mary's first experience of colors appears to afford her knowledge of what it is like to see color that she could obtain in no other way. Paul then gives the examples of having a first child of one's own and of gaining a new sense modality (such as hearing for the first time) – and, more hypothetically, of becoming a vampire – as experiences that are both epistemically *and* personally transformative. Paul contends that these kinds of experiences not only give a person new knowledge they could obtain in no other way (namely, what it is like to have a first child, hear sounds, or become a vampire). She contends that these experiences may also *personally* transform the individual, altering their core values or preferences (such as by transforming them from someone who didn't desire children into someone who now does, or vice versa). However, some commentators have expressed reservations about these claims, questioning whether having a first child or becoming a vampire are genuinely epistemically transformative given our capacities for imagination.

Other concrete experiences argued to be transformative include artistic experiences, suffering and serious illness, the process of dying, moral experience and moral failure, religious experiences, experiences of war, discovering one is transgender, developing into an adult, getting a divorce, or suffering personal betrayal. Some theorists also suggest that whether a concrete life experience is transformative, how transformative it is, and whether it *should* be transformative (from a moral point of view) all depend on social facts about one's situation, including what justice requires (*see* JUSTICE). Others argue that it is ultimately an empirical question whether and how a given experience is transformative – and recent empirical work suggests that judgments of whether an experience is transformative depend on how far the experience diverges from a person's "self-concept," particularly changes in their morality or personality (Molouki et al. forthcoming).

There are philosophical questions as well about how transformative experiences relate to other types of transformative phenomena: for example, *transformative expression*, where a person comes to reflectively endorse the transformed features of their person, as well as *transformative activity*, which involves a person actively working to transform into a different person. Transformative experiences have also been argued to illuminate the rationality of *adaptive preferences* – preferences which are objectively suboptimal for a person to have, but are nevertheless rational for them to have in their circumstances. For example, some transformative experiences (such as sudden poverty) may lead a person to develop radically new preferences that are rational given their new situation, despite the fact that it would be objectively better for them to have never been transformed by that situation (poverty) to begin with.

Transformative Experiences as a Challenge to Rational Choice

Although different philosophical theories of rationality exist, *decision theory* is the dominant theory of rational behavior in philosophy and the social sciences (*see* GAME THEORY AND RATIONAL CHOICE). *Descriptive decision theory* analyzes how

rational agents actually behave – that is, how agents behave if they are normatively rational. In contrast, *normative decision theory* analyzes how an agent *should* behave in order to act rationally. The most orthodox version of normative decision theory – *expected-utility theory* – understands rationality instrumentally, holding that an action is rational if and only if it is the best means for achieving the individual's ends or goals. Importantly, the value of expected outcomes (or ends) here is standardly understood in terms of *desire- or value-satisfaction*, with an agent's preferences defining their *utility function* (*see* DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD). Hence, normative decision theory holds that action is rational just in case that action has the greatest expected desirability or value, where this is the value of different possible ends multiplied by their probability of occurrence (*see* ENDS AND MEANS; INSTRUMENTAL VALUE). Consequently, orthodox decision theory holds that to make a rational decision, a person must have reliable information about what their preferences are or are likely to be.

Ullmann-Margalit and Paul both argue that transformative experiences challenge our ability to make normatively rational decisions, so defined. Ullmann-Margalit (2006) argues that "big decisions" in life (such as King Edward VIII abdicating the British throne for the woman he loved) have four characteristics, one of which is that they are "core affecting," radically altering the agent's desires or values. Because big decisions are transformative in this sense – drastically changing the agent's preferences or "rationality base" – Ullmann-Margalit argues that an agent has no stable utility function, and consequently, decision theory cannot explain how a rational choice is possible in such cases. Paul (2015a) has influentially developed the notion of a transformative experience much further, refining the challenge it presents to rational choice and defending (*contra* Ullmann-Margalit) a novel account of how it can be rational to choose to undergo a transformative experience.

First, Paul notes that in cases of transformative experience, an agent may have *objective* (such as statistical) evidence of how their utility function is likely to transform. For example, in imagining a hypothetical choice to become a vampire, Paul notes that one might have overwhelming evidence from others who have undergone the transformation that one is likely to be happy with the choice. Paul then notes that similar considerations might be able to explain how a person could rationally choose to undergo other transformative experiences, such as having a first child – as a person might gain objective, statistical evidence that they are likely to enjoy or not enjoy the experience, all things considered. Consequently, Paul holds (*pace* Ullmann-Margalit) that orthodox decision theory can explain how it can objectively be rational to choose a transformative experience. However, Paul argues that transformative experiences still pose a different kind of challenge to rational choice. According to Paul, many of us, at least in modern Western cultures, also ascribe to an ideal of *authenticity* (*see* AUTHENTICITY), wanting our choices to reflect our conception of who we are (in terms of our values and preferences), as well as reflect our own subjective understanding of what different outcomes would actually be like for us prospectively. Consequently, Paul contends that

transformative experiences pose a more subtle problem for rational choice than the problem posed by Ullmann-Margalit.

Specifically, Paul argues that experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative appear to render it impossible to make choices that are simultaneously rational *and* authentic. To illustrate, Paul gives the example of having a first child of one's own. First, Paul holds that the experience of having a first child is *epistemically* transformative, as it is impossible to understand what it is like to have a first child before the experience of actually having one. Paul claims that this makes it impossible for the chooser to authentically understand the subjective value of having a child, leaving their *utility function* undefined. Second, Paul contends that having a first child can also be *personally* transformative, fundamentally altering one's values and preferences. For example, although one may not have been sure one wanted a child before giving birth, the experience may transform one into a person who values having one's child more than anything (or vice versa). Consequently, Paul argues, it appears that the choice to have a first child cannot be made rationally *and* authentically. Although statistical information might be used to make a rational decision, in cases of experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative Paul argues the chooser nevertheless lacks an authentic prospective understanding of the *subjective value* of relevant outcomes, as well as any authentic sense of how the outcome represents their *own* values or preferences.

In subsequent work, Paul argues that these aspects of authenticity are important because we ordinarily want our choices to reflect an understanding of our *selves* – specifically, a subjective understanding of who we will *become* as a result of the choice. To understand who we will become as a result of a choice, Paul contends, we must be able to *empathize* with our future selves (*see* EMPATHY), understanding their preferences in a *de se* manner, that is, as *one's own* preferences. But this, Paul argues, is what epistemically and transformative experiences challenge. To grasp the core preferences that a personally transformative experience causes one to have as *one's own*, one must grasp them under a "subjective mode of presentation," understanding what it is like *for oneself* to have those preferences from a distinctly first-person perspective. However, when an experience is simultaneously epistemically and personally transformative, this appears impossible. For in these cases the *epistemically* transformative features of the experience (such as one's not knowing what it is like to have a child) make it impossible to subjectively know what it would be like for *oneself* to have the very different core preferences generated by the experience's *personally* transformative features. Thus, Paul contends, the problem that transformative experiences pose for rational and authentic choice results from rational and authentic choices having to be about *de se* preferences – preferences represented subjectively as one's own, which epistemically and personally transformative experiences make it impossible to represent at the moment of choice. However, Cappelen and Dever (2017) argue that the challenge transformative experiences present to rational and authentic choice can be captured without any such claims about *de se* preferences.

Critiques of Transformative Experiences as a Challenge to Rational Choice

Many commentators question whether transformative experiences pose the above problems. First, many question whether the kinds of experiences Paul discusses are epistemically transformative in a way that makes an authentic enough grasp of the subjective value of outcomes impossible. For example, some argue that Paul assumes an implausibly internalist conception of imagination, assuming we must experience the "qualia" (or "what it's like") of an outcome to adequately appreciate that outcome's subjective value. According to these critics, we can authentically understand what the experiences Paul discusses are like from the outside – grasping imaginatively, for instance, how bad it would be to live in poverty or wake up many times each night to care for a new child, based on stories, videos, and other forms of testimony. Further, some have suggested that a person's understanding of subjective value plausibly comes in degrees, such that a person may be able to know *enough* about a transformative experience (that it may lead to disappointment) to make a rational and authentic decision without knowing everything about what the experience is like. For example, a person who has never had a child cannot meet a "gold standard" of knowing *everything* about what it is like to have a first child. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that they may meet a "silver standard," subjectively understanding *some* significant aspects of what having a first child is like – such as what it is like to function on little sleep, the joys and difficulties they have seen other parents encounter, how difficult they have heard other people say parenting is, and so on. The thought then is that it may be possible to use this partial knowledge of what a transformative experience will subjectively be like, and how it may personally transform one's preferences, to make a rational choice that is *authentic enough*.

Other commentators question Paul's assumptions about the importance of subjective value, authenticity, and prospection in decision-making. Campbell (2015) argues that we do not typically make big life decisions on the basis of a subjective understanding of what outcomes are like, but instead on the basis of our *values*. Reuter and Messerli (2018) also carried out an empirical study indicating that subjective value plays only a minor role in decision-making. Others still have suggested that the philosophical lesson of transformative experiences is that we should reform cultural and personal ideals away from authenticity in favor of other values, such as the cultivation of personal resilience – a form of internal mastery that may enable people to grapple effectively with unexpected life events, including transformative experiences.

Finally, there is ongoing debate over whether transformative experiences pose any special philosophical problems for rational choice, or whether they reflect already well-known problems that exist independently of transformative experiences. First, epistemically transformative experiences have been argued to pose no problem for rational choice. For even if there are features of an epistemically transformative experience that we cannot grasp before we have it (such as what it is like to have a child), some argue that we can still understand *what matters* for making a rational

choice: namely, how *valuable* the experience is likely to be based on statistics, testimony, and perhaps imaginative extrapolation from experiences one is already epistemically familiar with. According to these critics, only *personally* transformative experiences pose a problem for rational choice. However, it has also been argued that personally transformative experiences pose no new problems for rational choice – as the problem they present, *preference shifts*, has long been known to pose problems for decision theory independently of transformative experience. As Briggs (2015) argues, the problem raised by personally transformative experiences is that they change the person's preferences radically over time, such that the person has very different, incommensurable preferences both before and after the experience – leaving them with an ill-defined utility function (*see* INCOMMENSURABILITY (AND INCOMPARABILITY)). But this, Briggs argues, is a problem generated simply by preference shifts, not by transformative experiences per se – since a person's preferences can shift without them undergoing a transformative experience. Consequently, some argue that transformative experiences present no special philosophical problems for rational choice. Nevertheless, there are those (such as Paul) who maintain that transformative experiences do pose unique challenges. Further, Capps (2018) argues that choices between different transformative experiences – or *transformative selections* between different options that may *all* be transformative (such as choosing between college, entering the military, or accepting a job in a foreign country) – pose a unique problem for rational choice, arguing they give rise to a problem of *unknowable costs* in comparing options.

Proposed Solutions to Challenges of Transformative Experience

A number of proposals have been defended as resolutions to the problems that transformative experiences have been argued to pose. Ullmann-Margalit contends that transformative experiences show that decision theory and rational choice have limits: that big life decisions must be made *without reasons*, as a kind of existential leap in the dark. Paul defends a different solution, arguing one can rationally and authentically choose to undergo a transformative experience for its own sake, because one wants to *discover* the subjective value of the experience as well as what it is like to personally transform from it. However, critics contend that Paul's proposal cannot solve the problem she presents, as it is unclear how a chooser can know in any authentic way whether the transformative experience will transform them into someone who wishes they had *not* pursued the transformative experience for its own sake.

   Other proposals have focused on grappling more directly with the epistemically and personally transformative features of such experiences. For example, Carr (2015) argues that a chooser should treat unknown subjective values of epistemically transformative experiences (such as what it is like to have a first child) as equivalent to outcomes the agent *neither values nor disvalues*. In contrast, Arvan (2016) argues that problems of transformative experience may be resolved, so far as they can be, by acting on principles that one's present self and *all* of one's possible future selves can

rationally endorse together given radical uncertainty about the future – which Arvan argues that only moral principles of fairness satisfy. However, the most influential approach appears to be Pettigrew's (2015) *fine-graining solution*, otherwise known as the "project a range" model. Pettigrew holds, first, that the subjective values of epistemically transformative experiences are not nearly as inscrutable as Paul presents – suggesting instead that we can understand the value of different possible outcomes via empirical evidence. Second, Pettigrew argues that it is possible to solve the problem of uncertainty about one's future preferences by using empirical evidence to assign *fine-grained* values (or "credences") to the subjective values of different outcomes across chunks of time along with their relative probabilities. According to Pettigrew, this enables the chooser not only to know the *subjective value* of outcomes sufficiently well (solving the problem of epistemically transformative experiences), but also to form a coherent and knowable *utility function* (solving the problem of personally transformative experiences).

However, critics argue Pettigrew's solution faces a number of problems. Paul (2015b) argues that it not only alienates us from our decisions, by requiring us to base decisions about transformative experiences primarily on third-person empirical data, but that it also fails to resolve the problem of intrapersonal utility comparison, as the credences Pettigrew's proposal has a chooser assign to outcomes must either be based on one's present preferences *or* one's future preferences, but not both (since in cases of personally transformative experiences those preference sets are incommensurable). Collins (2015) attempts to resolve these concerns by arguing that the chooser might map a familiar space of options (what it was like in the past to make a transformative decision, such as a choice of a new career) to a new case (parenthood), giving the chooser an *authentic enough* understanding of the subjective value of different possible outcomes, as well as an understanding of how to *commensurate* their preferences both before and after the experience. For example, Collins suggests that if a person learns from previous transformative choices that they are "neophobic," tending not to like new experiences of a given sort (such as choices that radically alter their lifestyle) *both before and after* such choices are made, they might rationally and authentically treat a new case (choosing whether to have a child) as constituting a similar choice. However, a certain kind of transformative experience – religious transformative experience – has been argued to be resistant to any version of the fine-graining response, due to the manner in which religious transformative experiences may be genuinely ineffable (having subjective value that can in no way be understood at all prior to the experience), have potentially infinite value or disvalue, and have unknown probabilities. Finally, Isaacs (2019) argues that Pettigrew's model has multiple formal and philosophical problems, among them that the fine-grained utility functions Pettigrew posits have counterintuitive implications, are not well defined individually, and require averaging across different utility functions when this is mathematically ill defined.

Finally, insofar as some argue that transformative experiences pose no special challenge to rational choice beyond already well-known problems of preference shifts and intrapersonal utility comparisons, some maintain the real challenge is

whether decision theory can resolve these broader problems. Although Briggs (2015) considers a variety of possible solutions – including the idea that there is a single objective preference function correctly representing each individual's well-being over time regardless of how their preferences change – these matters remain open to philosophical debate. Consequently, it remains an open philosophical question whether transformative experiences pose any unique problems for rational choice, whether the problems they do pose can be adequately resolved, and if so, how.

See also: AUTHENTICITY; DESIRE THEORIES OF THE GOOD; EMPATHY; ENDS AND MEANS; EXISTENTIALISM; GAME THEORY AND RATIONAL CHOICE; INCOMMENSURABILITY (AND INCOMPARABILITY); INSTRUMENTAL VALUE; JUSTICE; RATIONALITY

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