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self enough to generate a deep phenomenological transformation creates significant trouble for the hope that we could use our ordinary subjective perspective to make rational decisions about major life events.

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## SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Elizabeth Barnes

**Abstract:** In this paper, I argue that whether, how, and to what extent an experience is transformative is often highly contingent. I then further argue that sometimes social conditions are a major factor in whether a certain type of experience is often or typically transformative. Sometimes social conditions make it easy for a type of experience to be transformative, and sometimes they make it hard for a type of experience to be transformative. This, I claim, can sometimes be a matter of social justice: social conditions can make transformativeness too easy or too hard, in a way that harms people.

Much attention has been paid, in recent discussions, to the epistemic and decision-theoretic implications of transformative experiences. In this paper, I focus on a different and less explored aspect of transformative experiences: their normative significance.

L. A. Paul (2014; 2015), helpfully distinguishes between two ways in which an experience can be transformative. An experience is *epistemically transformative* if it gives you new 'what it's like' information that you didn't previously have access to (2014, 155). And experience is *personally transformative* if it significantly alters your priorities, your preferences, and your self-conception (2014, 156). I begin by making three very simple observations about both types of transformative experience. The first is that it is often contingent whether a particular type of experience is transformative in either sense. The second is that the transformativeness, in either sense, of a given experience is something that can come in degrees. The third is that how or in what way a particular type of experience is transformative can vary. I'm then going to use these three observations to argue that whether, how, and to what extent an experience is transformative can sometimes be a matter of social justice.

### 1 Transformativeness Is Contingent

When we got our dog, my husband—who had never had a dog, didn't want a dog, and only caved in to getting a dog after years of my pestering—fell instantly, deeply in love with her, and with dogs in general. The experience,

by his own recounting, was both personally and phenomenologically transformative. He became aware of new and surprising information that was previously opaque to him—*what it's like* to share a deep emotional bond with a non-human animal. And his priorities and preferences changed in drastic ways. He rearranged his entire work schedule to make it maximally dog-friendly, he began giving money to dog charities, he no longer wanted to travel in his time off because he hated leaving the dog. Getting a dog had a profound, transformational effect on his life.

Needless to say, however, getting a dog doesn't always have this effect. Some people just aren't dog people. And some people, while they love their dog and really like dogs in general, nevertheless aren't emotionally transformed by the experience. Their dog is wonderful, but not life changing. Only the select few—the genuine *dog people* of world—seem to be convinced that dogs are the single greatest thing on earth, unrivaled in the love and companionship they bring. Whether getting a dog is transformative depends in part on whether you are such a person. And as my husband's experience shows, it can be difficult to predict whether you are such a person.

But whether an experience is transformative doesn't depend merely on what sort of person you are. It can also depend, at least in part, on your social environment and circumstances. In the novel *Great Expectations*, coming into wealth—and learning he has a substantial inheritance—is a both a personally and an epistemically transformative experience for Pip. He learns new information that was previously opaque to him—*what it's like* to have economic and social prospects, and to not be limited by his social status. He also shifts both his priorities and his self-conception. He decides he's going to be a respectable gentleman, and that his chief priority is to maintain his newly found social status. But Pip's coming into money has the potential to be so transformative for him in part because of his social class. Had he been slightly less poor or faced slightly fewer class barriers, coming into the same inheritance might well have altered him less radically. Transitioning to an upper-middle-class education and lifestyle is transformative for Pip at least in part because, due to the social constraints at the time, his poor, working class background had made him believe that such a transition was impossible.

So here is the first general observation I want to make about transformative experiences. Whether a particular token of a general type of experience is transformative is contingent. An experience which is actually transformative might have failed to be so, and vice versa. And, more specifically, whether a particular token experience is transformative can sometimes depend on features external to the experience itself. Whether a particular experience is transformative can depend, in part, both on contingent features of a person's psychological makeup and on contingent facts about their wider social situation.

## 2 Transformativeness Comes in Degrees

Epistemically transformative experiences are those in which a person gains new phenomenological information which they did not previously have access to. Personally transformative experiences are those in which a person's preferences, desires, and self-conception are altered. Both types of transformation are, arguably, things that admit of greater and lesser degrees.

In N. K. Jemisin's novel *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, the main character Yeine becomes a god. This experience is, unsurprisingly, described in the novel as extremely epistemically transformative. Suddenly Yeine understands the connectedness of things, suddenly she can experience reality both temporally and atemporally, suddenly she has a nearly omnipresent sense of first-person perspective. Her sense of knowing *what it's like* to be a god is profoundly transformative, and was certainly something that was epistemically opaque to her when she was a human.

The first time I tried Irn Bru, I also gained new phenomenological information—I learned *what it's like* to taste Irn Bru. And it's fair to say that this information was previously opaque to me. No amount of previous soft drink tasting could have prepared me for the uniquely bizarre taste of Irn Bru. But there's a very wide phenomenological gulf between my first taste of Irn Bru and Yeine's becoming a god, even if we both gain some new 'what it's like' information.

Between these two cases lie many types of experiences we might think of as epistemically transformative. Holding your newborn child for the first time, experiences a type of synesthesia, having a migraine aura, falling in love, taking peyote—these will all give you new access to specific types of 'what it's like' information that you didn't previously have access to. So there's a sense in which all these experiences might be considered epistemically transformative.

But plausibly these experiences might give you both different amounts of new information and differently significant new information. Holding your newborn child might allow you to understand what it's like to love someone completely unconditionally, to feel fully responsible for another life, etc. A type of synesthesia might allow you to understand what it's like to associate numbers with colors. Both experiences may well give you new access to phenomenological information—it might be impossible to know what it's like to have either experience until you've actually had the experience. But holding your newborn child may well give you both more such information and more epistemically or personally significant such information.

In the Book of Acts, we are told the story of St. Paul's sudden, profound religious experience. The experience is clearly personally transformative for Paul. It completely rearranges his priorities, his desires, and even his

own self-conception—all he wants, after the experience, is to evangelize, and he's willing to put his own life at risk to do so.

My introduction to philosophy also had an effect on my priorities, my beliefs, and even my self-conception. I became very excited about philosophy, I began to apply philosophical methodology to other parts of my life, I began to consider the prospect of further study and career opportunities in philosophy, and I even began to think that maybe, one day, I could be a philosopher. There's certainly a sense in which being introduced to philosophy had a striking effect on my beliefs, my desires, and perhaps even my self-conception. But I very much doubt that my introduction to philosophy was transformative to the extent that Paul's vision on the road to Damascus is described as being transformative.

In between my first experience of philosophy and Paul's transformative religious experience we can find many of the kinds of things we might typically think of as personally transformative experiences. Coming close to death or being diagnosed with a serious illness, falling in love, getting divorced, becoming involved in a social justice movement, caring for an aging parent—these can all be the kind of thing that might rearrange one's priorities, desires, and sense of self. But they plausibly don't all always do so to exactly the same extent, or with exactly the same degree of personal significance.

With all this in mind, I contend that transformativeness—in either sense—isn't an on/off status of experiences. It's not the case, that is, that either an experience is transformative or it isn't. Transformativeness is something that can come in degrees. An experience  $e_1$  can be more transformative than an experience  $e_2$ , even though they are both transformative. Whether there is a threshold for how much an experience must change you in order to count as personally transformative or how much 'what it's like' information an experience must give you in order to count as epistemically transformative isn't a question I'm going to address here. All I want is the simple claim that transformativeness comes in degrees.<sup>1</sup>

### 3 The Character of Transformativeness Is Variable

So far I have argued that there is variation in both whether and to what extent a particular type of experience is transformative. Transformativeness is contingent, and it comes in degrees. I'm now going to claim, somewhat more nebulously, that how or in what way a type of experience is transformative is also something that is contingent, and which can and does vary.

<sup>1</sup> This observation brings up an interesting puzzle—which I will simply mention in passing—for Paul's account of the connection between rationality and transformativeness. Paul argues that we cannot rationally decide to undergo (or fail to undergo) an experience which is transformative. But if transformativeness comes in degrees, the simple question arises: *how much* transformativeness is required to preclude rational decision making?

Perhaps when Anna holds her newborn baby for the first time, she undergoes an epistemically transformative experience—she learns what it's like to hold her newborn baby. And perhaps Bob also undergoes a transformative experience when *he* holds *his* newborn baby. But there isn't much reason to think that the information they now have access to, via their transformation, is the same—even if it shares some commonalities. That is, there isn't much reason to think that what it's like for Anna to hold Anna's baby is the same thing as what it's like for Bob to hold Bob's baby. Indeed, it would pretty implausible if the phenomenal content of these experiences were the same, given all the different experiences that will have led up to them, and all the differences in the two people who are the subjects of the experience. Perhaps holding your new baby is a type of experience that is generally epistemically transformative. That doesn't mean it's always transformative in the same way. It might generally lead to new phenomenological information—but to different new phenomenological information for different people.

Similarly, suppose that near-death experiences are often personally transformative. Even given this commonality, such experiences will likely be transformative in strikingly different ways for different people. Suppose that Ciara and Dani both survive sudden, near-fatal car accidents. Ciara decides, in the wake of this experience, that you only live once, so you have to live to fullest. She quits her city job to pursue her dream of becoming a white water rafting guide. She starts working on her 'bucket list', learns to parachute and bungee jump, and generally begins to pursue high-octane adventure. Dani, in contrast, becomes strikingly more risk averse. She makes a will and begins to carefully invest her savings. She starts to exercise, eat healthily, get plenty of sleep, and generally take better care of herself. She spends more time with family and friends.

Both Ciara and Dani's experiences are personally transformative, but the way in which they were personally transformative is very different. They each re-evaluate their goals, priorities, and preferences—and perhaps even their self-conception—but they do so in very different ways, and to very different results. *That* an experience is personally transformative doesn't tell you *how* it is personally transformative. The same type of experience can be equally transformative for two different people, but transform those people in two very different ways.

### 4 Hard and Easy Transformative Experience

It's tempting to think of transformativeness as an inherent aspect of experience. Some experiences are just *special*. But as discussed in section 1, this isn't quite right—whether an experience is transformative can depend on factors external to that experience. Whether an experience is transformative can be partly determined by independent facts about the person having the experience, and partly determined by facts about the wider social context

in which the experience is had. It's this latter set of factors I now want to focus on.

It's the wider social context of *Great Expectations*—and Pip's position in it—that make his inheritance transformative. No doubt aspects of Pip's personality play a role as well. But the socio-economic structures of Victorian England facilitate the kind of transformation Pip experiences—they make it *easy* for coming into wealth to be (very) transformative. In a society where there was less socio-economic stratification, or less social emphasis placed on class, it would be less easy for Pip's experience of inheritance to be transformative, or transformative to the same degree.

Similarly, let's follow Paul (2014) and assume that becoming a parent is often a very transformative experience. Conditions and expectations surrounding parenthood for wealthy, educated people in modern, Western societies no doubt facilitate the transformativeness of the experience of parenthood. Parenthood is often the result of careful deliberation, it is highly anticipated (and typically delayed well beyond the beginning of reproductive age), and it is upheld within our society as something that adds special meaning or significance to life. With all these conditions in place, it's not surprising that parenthood might often be experienced as transformative. But this isn't obviously a feature of parenthood simpliciter—parenthood devoid of the complex socio-economic circumstances in which it occurs. Whether a 17-year-old living in a multi-generational agrarian community in the 1800s would, for example, experience parenthood as transformative in the same way, or to the same degree, seems doubtful.

But just as social conditions can make it easy for an experience to be transformative, they can also make it hard. In a society with very little emphasis on class and a high degree of social mobility, it would be hard for an experience of sudden inheritance like Pip's to be transformative, or transformative to the same degree. It wouldn't be impossible—there might still be people who care a very great deal about wealth and social standing, even if that isn't the social norm—but transformativeness of such an experience would be unusual or atypical.

With all this in mind, I want to make the following general claims. A set of social conditions, *S*, make it *easy* for a type of experience, *E*, to be transformative just in case: (i) in nearby worlds in which *S* obtains, *E*-type experiences are often or typically transformative; (ii) in nearby worlds in which *S* does not obtain, *E*-type experiences are not often or typically transformative.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, a set of social conditions, *S*, make it *hard*

<sup>2</sup> This account of will, of course, face the standard types of problems encountered by counterfactual definitions. It will, for example, give the wrong results if the nearby worlds at which social conditions *S* don't obtain are such that social conditions *S\** obtain, and *S\** also make it easy for *E*-type experiences to be transformative. I'm giving these counterfactuals in order to give a basic gloss on how I'm understanding what it is for transformative experience to be made easy (or hard). I don't want to read too much into this as a counterfactual *analysis*, and it will no doubt be subject to funny counterexamples.

for a type of experience, *E*, to be transformative just in case: (i) in nearby worlds in which *S* obtains, *E*-type experiences are not often transformative or are atypically transformative; (ii) in nearby worlds in which *S* does not obtain, *E*-type experiences are more often or not atypically transformative.

Some experiences might be transformative regardless of the social circumstances in which they occur. Gaining a new sense modality, for example, might be epistemically transformative no matter the social context. And some experiences might depend primarily on personal, rather than social circumstances. Whether a particular type of experience is transformative might be primarily a function of whether the experiencer is a dog person, or has a religious cast of mind, or etc. And plausibly many experiences we tend to think of as transformative depend on a combination of both personal and social factors—whether you're a dog person in a pet-owning society, whether you're a religiously-minded person in a somewhat religious society, and so on.

When I say that a particular set of social conditions make it easy for a type of experience to be transformative, I don't simply mean that those social conditions facilitate the transformativeness of that type of experience together with some quirk or personality or character. Our social norms about pet ownership no doubt facilitate the transformativeness of dog ownership *for dog people*. But dog people are a quixotic bunch, and they certainly aren't the majority. When I say that a particular set of social conditions make it easy for a type of experience to be transformative, the thought is that most people—regardless of quirks of personality—who undergo such an experience given those conditions will find it transformative. It is typical or usual, in those conditions, for that experience to be transformative.

That needn't mean that the experience is itself common or typical. Perhaps the experience of becoming a sovereign ruler in the social context of absolute monarchy is typically transformative. The experience itself is a rare one. But most people, regardless of contingent facts about their personality, would find such an experience transformative. The social conditions of absolute monarchy can make it easy for becoming king or queen to be transformative without that experience being commonplace.

Social conditions making it hard for a type of experience to be transformative is not simply the converse of their making it easy. Easy and hard aren't exhaustive options, though they are exclusive. Modern norms about pet ownership might not make it easy for getting a dog to be transformative, but neither do they make it hard. For particular social conditions to make it hard for a type of experience to be transformative, it needs to be the case both that the experience isn't often transformative or is atypically transformative given those conditions, and that it would be transformative more often, or not atypically, transformative in the absence of those conditions.

Note that this is weaker than the requirement that in the absence of those conditions such experiences would often or typically be transformative.<sup>3</sup> Social conditions in which dogs are commercially reared as food and eaten as part of a standard diet would plausibly make it the case that getting a dog is very rarely a transformative experience. In the absence of those conditions, it still wouldn't be common for getting a dog to be transformative (since it still wouldn't be common to be a dog person). But it would be substantially more common. The presence of dog-eating social conditions can make it hard for getting a dog to be transformative, even though the absence of such conditions isn't sufficient to make it easy for getting a dog to be transformative.

With this basic understanding of hard and easy in place, we can then further complicate them by combining them with both degree and character of experience. We can say, for example, that set of social conditions,  $S$ , make it easy for a type of experience,  $E$ , to be transformative *in way*  $W$  just in case: (i) in nearby worlds in which  $S$  obtains,  $E$ -type experiences are often or typically transformative in way  $W$ ; (ii) in nearby worlds in which  $S$  does not obtain,  $E$ -type experiences are not often or typically transformative in way  $W$ . Similarly, we can say that a set of social conditions,  $S$ , makes it easy for a type of experience,  $E$ , to be transformative *to degree*  $n^4$  just in case: (i) in nearby worlds in which  $S$  obtains,  $E$ -type experiences are often or typically transformative to degree  $n$ ; (ii) in nearby worlds in which  $S$  does not obtain,  $E$ -type experiences are not often or typically transformative to degree  $n$ .

So, for example, current social conditions for affluent, educated people might make it easy for having a child to be very transformative, or transformative in specific ways (involving a sense of added meaning to your life, perhaps). In different social conditions, having a child might tend to be somewhat less transformative, or might tend to be transformative in different ways. Similarly, in our current social conditions, if someone falls in love with a person of the same gender, this experience can be transformative in the familiar ways in which falling in love can be transformative. But in different social conditions, a person's falling in love with someone of the same gender might be transformative in very different ways—it might convince them they are particularly sinful, for example, or change their life to one of secrecy and isolation. How, and to what extent, an experience is transformative is shaped by social factors.

In what follows, I'm going to argue that whether and how social conditions make it easy or hard for a type of experience to be transformative can sometimes be a matter of social justice.

<sup>3</sup> I'm assuming here that 'atypical' is stronger than 'not typical.'

<sup>4</sup> This is a convenient fiction—I don't want to suggest that the degree to which an experience is transformative is (always) precisely quantifiable in this way. Talk of 'transformative to degree  $n$ ' is just to highlight that experiences can vary in how transformative they are.

## 5 When Transformation Is Too Easy

Sometimes, social conditions make it easy for a type of experience to be transformative—or for a type of experience to be transformative in a particular sort of way. And sometimes, it shouldn't be easy for a type of experience to be transformative, or shouldn't be easy for an experience to be transformative in that particular way. One way in which social conditions can be harmful is by making certain kind of transformations easy.

Consider, for example, transformations that are made easy because of gender stereotypes and entrenched gender roles. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke's marriage to Mr. Casaubon is described as a personally transformative experience. Dorothea's wishes, her values, and her priorities are all reshaped—they are completely reordered—in order to comply with Mr. Casaubon's. Upon marrying, she believes that her primary purpose (perhaps even her sole purpose) is to be of assistance to her husband. The transition is not an easy one for Dorothea, by any means. But she undergoes it willingly, believing it to be her calling as Mr. Casaubon's wife:

By a sad contradiction, Dorothea's ideas and resolves seemed like melting ice floating and lost in the warm flood of which they had been but another form. She was humiliated to find herself a mere victim of feeling, as if she could know nothing except through that medium: all her strength was scattered in fits of agitation, of struggle, of despondency, and then again in visions of more complete renunciation, transforming all hard conditions into duty. (Eliot 2007 [1871], 208)

Eliot describes Mr. Casaubon as receiving, without question, this humbling transformation from Dorothea. She writes of Mr. Casaubon that:

It had occurred to him that he must not any longer defer his attention of matrimony, and he had reflected that in taking a wife, a man of good position should expect and carefully choose a blooming young lady—the younger the better, because more educable and submissive—of a rank equal to his own, of religious principles, virtuous disposition, and good understanding. On such a young lady he would make handsome settlements, and he would neglect no arrangement for her happiness: in return, he should receive family pleasures and leave behind him that copy of himself which seemed so urgently required of a man. . . . And when he had seen Dorothea he believed that he had found even more than he demanded: she might really be such a helpmate to him as would enable him to dispense with a hired secretary. . . . Providence, in its kindness,

had supplied him with the wife he needed. A wife, a modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, is sure to think her husband's mind powerful. Whether providence had taken equal care of Miss Brooke in presenting her with Mr Casaubon is an idea which could hardly occur to him. (2007 [1871], 293)

It's plausible that becoming a *wife* was often, in the context of such gender norms and stereotypes, a transformative experience. Personally transformative experiences are those which reshape your priorities, your preferences, and your self-conception or sense of identity. And that's exactly what getting married was supposed to do for women (though not for men, of course). Massive shifts in priorities and self-conception were the expectation for women—and women only—upon marriage.<sup>5</sup>

So here is one striking characteristic of the hierarchical gender norms described in *Middlemarch*: they suggest that becoming a wife *ought* to be a transformative experience. When someone becomes a wife, she should rearrange her priorities, her desires, and her projects to cohere with and conform to her husband's. Being *her husband's wife* should be her primary role, and her primary self-conception.

Dorothea is intelligent, brave, thoughtful, and ambitious. In different circumstances, she would've pursued her own career and her own ideas. But within the restrictive gender hierarchy of 1830s England, her best sense of how to pursue her love of learning is by devoting herself—completely—as the wife of a scholarly man. In order to do this, she must undergo a deeply transformational experience. She must learn to prioritize his feelings over her feelings and she must begin to attempt to view things as he does.

The gendered norms of 1830s England make it *easy* for Dorothea's marriage to be a transformative experience. And more specifically, they make it easy for her marriage to be transformative in specific ways—ways which subsume her wishes, her preferences, and her sense of self to that of her husband. Arguably, that they make it so easy is a bad thing—it is part of the structural badness of such norms that they make transformative experiences like Dorothea's easy. The kind of self-abnegation involved in Dorothea's transformative experience is harmful to her. It changes her in a way that leaves her feeling lonely, unfulfilled, and frustrated. And it's not just harmful to Dorothea. Eliot suggests that Dorothea is a better, clearer thinker than Casaubon. If she had been able to pursue her own projects and ideas, she would likely have produced more valuable work than he ever could. But the transformative experience she undergoes, upon her marriage, leaves her with a very poor opinion of her own taste and judgement, and teaches her to value Casaubon's opinion above her own.

Abstracting away from the particular case of Dorothea and 1830s gender norms, the more general point I'd like to make is this. Sometimes the fact

<sup>5</sup> See especially Yalom 2002.

that social conditions make it easy for a particular type of experience to be transformative is harmful. It can be *too easy* for an experience to be transformative, and it can likewise be too easy for an experience to be transformative in specific ways. There can be cases in which an experience's being transformative—or being transformative in a particular way—constitutes a harm, and insofar as social conditions make that kind of transformation easy, they perpetuate that harm.

## 6 When Transformation Is Too Hard

But just as social conditions can facilitate transformative experience in ways that are harmful, they can also prevent or impede transformative experience in ways that are harmful.<sup>6</sup> Consider the social conditions and norms surrounding disability. There is perhaps a minimal and not very interesting sense in which becoming disabled is always at least an epistemically transformative. You learn what it is like to have a certain kind of physical condition—knowledge you did not previously have access to. But becoming or being disabled can also be personally transformative—and whether, how, and to what extent it is so is a more complex issue.<sup>7</sup>

Simi Linton is a disabled scholar and activist whose experience of becoming disabled as an adult was personally transformative. It changed the way she thought about herself, her priorities, and her relationship to others. Moreover, she views this change as a positive one—her sense of self has been importantly shaped by being disabled, and being a disabled person is a valued part of her identity. In her book *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* she describes the importance of disability as a type of self-identity, and as a way of building a disability community. Disability identity, she argues, is in part:

an account of the world negotiated from the vantage point of the atypical. . . . The cultural stuff of the community is the creative response to atypical experience, the adaptive maneuvers through a world configured for nondisabled people. The material that binds us is the art of finding one another, of identifying and naming disability in a world reluctant to discuss it. . . . My experience as a disabled [person] and my alliance with the community are a source of identity, motivation, and information. (Linton 1998, 5)

But *becoming* disabled isn't the only way in which disability can provide transformative experience. Sometimes a transformative experience occurs, not in virtue of a newly acquired disability, but in virtue of a newly acquired way of viewing a disability. For example, disability activist Steven E. Brown,

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of the intersection of identity, transformative experience, and oppression see McKinnon 2015.

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of transformative experience and disability see Howard 2015.

in his essay 'I was Born in a Hospital Bed (When I was 31 Years Old)' (2003), recounts his experience of a sudden shift in the way he viewed his disability. Brown was born with a painful degenerative condition, and had spent most of his life up to this point feeling as though this was his own 'cross to bear' or his own personal tragedy. But then, in the wake of having been denied work because of his disability and attending a disability rights event to ascertain whether he might be able to combat this discrimination, something changed. He writes:

I was born in a hospital bed when I was thirty-one years old. . .

As I lay on that bed I benefitted from the luxury of unhurried contemplation. I focused on my body—which had steamrolled me into this predicament. I was tired of that body. . .

As I began this mental meandering I could only think about the past twenty-five years in a cloud of unbridled agony. But, then, in the time it took to inhale the scent wafting from nearby flowers, I underwent one of those sudden transformations that people often label revelations. . .

I was thirty-one years old and my body had borne more scars than most people feel in a lifetime twice as long. I thought about those heroes of my youth—stars of various sports—and the scores of times commentators bemoaned the aches and pains athletes lived and played through. I realized that my body had taken an athlete's abuse over and over again and rebounded every time. . .

I began to view my body differently. For a long time I had been consumed with bitterness and anger. . . . The hospital inspired rendering of this litany of breaks and bruises awakened me to another truth. My body had weathered a storm of abuse—some of which was inherent in my being and some of which I had heaped upon it in my rebellion against its limitations. Laying in that hospital bed I also saw that the thunder and lightning had alternated with periods of sunshine and calm. I decided right then and there to be nice to my body. In essence I made a life-affirming decision. I recognized myself for who I was, with my disability and its limitations—and with my disability and its affirmations. A funny thing happened when I chose to like my body. I also began to like myself a lot more. And to embrace life itself. (Brown 2003, 61–63)

Brown's experience was personally transformative—so much so, even, that he describes it as the day he was born. From this point on, he became a disability activist and immersed himself in the disability rights community.

But the transformation wasn't due to acquiring a disability, it was due to changing the way in which he viewed his disability.

Similarly, disability rights activist Tammy S. Thompson describes a transformational experience that occurred in virtue of a shift in disability-related perspective, rather than disability status:

I've spent many years on a mission to cancel out my disability by frantically stacking up achievements, hoping that someday I would find that final, magic accomplishment which would absolve me of the sin of being disabled. . . . No matter what I did, I collided with that hard fact. I couldn't seem to accept it and carry on without shame. Then one day, riding the bus, I met a fellow with a disability who was proud. He was comfortable with himself and his disability. Disability pride—wasn't that an oxymoron? I had to find out, so I got involved in the independent living movement he told me about.

Participating in the Center for Disability Leadership program brought me up to speed and launched me into the disability rights movement. My life and my thinking were liberated. I got connected with powerful, wonderful people who were also disabled. These disability warriors taught me a new way to live that frees me from my past. (Thompson 1997)

Like Brown, Thompson's transformative experience arises via a shift in her perspective about her own disability. And like both Brown and Linton, the key aspect of this transformational experience—a sense of positive self-identity as a disabled person—arises due to interaction with the disability rights community.

For each of Linton, Brown, and Thompson, it seems that whether, how, and to what extent their experiences of disability were transformative is highly contingent. They each attribute their formation of a strong, positive disability identity to their interactions with the disability community and the disability rights movement. Nor do they appear to be alone in this. Research suggests that a strong, positive sense of self-identity as a disabled person is common within the disability rights community.<sup>8</sup> But, of course, whether one has access to the affirming, encouraging, often life-altering (as it was for Linton, Brown, and Thompson) support of the disability community is a highly contingent thing—many, perhaps most, disabled people in contemporary society do not.

The type of personally transformative experiences reported by Linton, Brown, and Thompson are those in which disability positively reshapes their identity and self-conception. They come to think of themselves as

<sup>8</sup> See Hahn and Belt 2004. Hahn and Belt's study further suggests that positive disability self-identity is strongly correlated with negative attitudes toward 'cures' for disability.



disabled people (not just as people who happen to have disabilities), in a way that's personally valuable to them. And this kind of positive sense of disability self-identity isn't just a theoretical curiosity. Whether disability is transformational in this way is something that has the potential to beneficially impact disabled peoples' lives. For example, current research suggests that, for disabled people, non-acceptance of disability is correlated with depression (and predicts future depression),<sup>9</sup> that positive disability identity predicts self-esteem,<sup>10</sup> and that positive disability identity predicts satisfaction with life.<sup>11</sup>

Forming a positive sense of self-identity as a disabled person is one way in which being or becoming disabled can be personally transformative. But, I suggest, it is *hard* for being or becoming disabled to be transformative in this way, given the current social norms and stereotypes surrounding disability. As Linton (1998) points out, many of the positive transformative aspects of disability have to do with experiencing an affirming and accepting sense of disability identity, and the sense of community with other disabled people that this can bring. And yet, she argues, dominant stereotypes about disability suggest precisely the opposite. Disability is not, as standardly understood, something that gives you access to—or something you experience with—a community. Disability is individual tragedy or private burden. Similarly, we tend to think of the potential good effects of disability only in terms of *overcoming* disability—the perseverance, the patience, the fortitude that being disabled can teach. The thought that disability could actually be a positive aspect of someone's self-conception—something they value about themselves, for its own sake—is an idea that's incredibly foreign to most people.

Nowhere is this more telling than in the fact that “I've never really considered you disabled” or “I don't think of you as disabled” are things that non-disabled people say, to disabled people, as *compliments*. When a non-disabled person says “I've never really considered you disabled,” they don't typically mean that they don't consider you to have a condition that is generally thought of as a disability. They aren't expressing surprise that you use an accessible parking spot or bathroom stall. What they're saying is that they've never really considered you *less than* or *deficient* in some important way. (Cheer up, disabled person—this normal person thinks of you as normal! You should be flattered.)

It's hardly surprising, in the context of such flagrant stereotypes about disability, that transformative experiences involving a positive sense of disability self-identity stand out as atypical or rare. They are certainly

<sup>9</sup> See Townend et al. 2010

<sup>10</sup> See Nario-Redmond et al. 2013

<sup>11</sup> See Bogart 2014. Bogart interprets her findings as follows: “Results suggest that rather than attempting to ‘normalize’ individuals with disabilities, health care professionals should foster their disability self-concept. Possible ways to improve disability self-concept are discussed, such as involvement in the disability community and disability pride” (9).

not the norm or the expectation—and seem very often to be mediated by interaction with the disability rights community, an interaction which is itself not the norm or the expectation. We expect disabled people to try to ‘overcome’ their disabilities and to hope for ‘a cure.’ Neither of these expectations cohere well with a positive sense of disability as an important, valuable part of disabled peoples' self-identity.

And so, I contend, current norms and stereotypes about disability make the kind of personally transformative experiences described by Linton, Brown, and Thompson *hard*. These experiences are atypical, but I suggest that they are atypical—at least in part—because of the dominant norms and stereotypes about disability. Furthermore, I suggest that it is harmful to disabled people if our current norms and stereotypes about disability make these transformative experiences hard. These experiences are a valuable aspect of being disabled, and they have the potential to have significant positive impact on the wellbeing of disabled people. If they are hard to come by, that's harmful.

## 7 Transformative Experience and Social Identities

I have argued that social conditions can make it hard for certain kinds of experiences to be transformative (or to be transformative in certain ways or to certain extents), and that social conditions can likewise make it easy for certain kinds of experiences to be transformative. And I've further argued that sometimes whether it is hard or easy for a certain kind of experience to be transformative can be a matter of social justice. Sometimes the fact that social conditions make it hard (or easy) for an experience to be transformative constitutes can constitute a harm (or a benefit).

I want to summarize by making a claim about the relationship between personally transformative experience and identity. Experiences are personally transformative when they re-shape your self-conception or sense of self-identity. But self-conception and sense of self-identity aren't developed in cultural isolation. Social norms and structures make certain ways of interpreting or thinking about ourselves readily available. Faithful husband, loving mother, brilliant genius, tragic overcomer, self-sacrificing caregiver, breadwinner, muse—these are all ways we can think about ourselves and our own experiences. *Which* ways of thinking about ourselves are most salient or readily available will be, at least in part, a function of the social norms and structures in which we find ourselves.

If a personally transformative experience is one that re-shapes our sense of self, then personally transformative experiences can be radically affected by which ways of re-shaping our sense of self are salient to us. ‘Submissive and dutiful wife’ was, in 1830s England, an easy way for Dorothea Brooke to understand herself and her own experience. ‘Free-thinking scholar’ was not. ‘Brave inspiration’ is an easy way for disabled people to understand

their own experiences now. 'Thriving person in an unconventional body' is not.

What ways of understanding yourself and your own sense of identity your social situation makes salient needn't always be a normatively weighty matter. Plausibly, sometimes a type of identity might be readily available—and a corresponding transformational experience might be made easy—for reasons of (not very interesting) cultural accident. Perhaps, for example, being a Mod or a Rocker in 1960s England really was an important part of some peoples' sense of identity, and perhaps some people really did undergo personally transformative experiences when they found their scene. Nevertheless, whether one can easily identify as a Mod or a Rocker doesn't seem to be a particularly pressing matter of social justice. Indeed, it seems large a matter of accident—to be a Mod or a Rocker you just have to be in the right place at the right time.

In other cases though, the availability of specific identities is more plausibly something that matters. The fact that it was so easy for women to re-shape their self conception to cohere with the image of a dutiful, submissive wife was something that was bad for women. Part of achieving justice for women is making identities like this less readily available, and making other identities more readily available.

The relevance of transformative experiences to epistemology and decision theory is something that's received a lot of attention recently. But if I'm right, transformative experiences aren't of interest only for their epistemological or decision-theoretic import. Whether, how, and to what extent a type of experience is transformative is something that can sometimes matter morally as well.

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