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# Transformative Experience: Are Real-world Experiences as Transformative as We Think?

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Claremont McKenna College

Transformative Experience:  
Are Real-world Experiences as Transformative as We Think?

submitted to  
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and  
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by  
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## Abstract

This thesis analyzes L.A. Paul's concept of *transformative experience*. It specifically analyzes Paul's criteria for transformative experiences (TEs), which are experiences that are so epistemically (ET) and personally transformative (PT) that an agent can't know what it's like to have a TE until having the experience itself. Paul argues that the transformative nature of these experiences prevent us from being able to make a rational choice using our normative way of decision-making. According to Paul, this is especially problematic because some of life's biggest choices involve TEs. I begin with an overview of Paul's main thought experiments that illustrate the structure of TEs that real-world agents face. I then clarify Paul's criteria for TE, and ET and PT experiences. I argue that life's biggest choices are not ET, except in very rare cases, and thus are not TEs. I conclude that in the vast majority of cases, we *can* make rational choices when faced with life's biggest decisions.

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## Introduction

Every so often, life presents us with what we consider to be big, life-changing choices. Choices that we believe will teach us something new about the world and irrevocably change who we are. Getting married, having a baby, and choosing to enlist in the military intuitively fall into this category. L.A. Paul calls these *transformative choices* (Paul 2015, 5). Transformative choice are decisions that involve *transformative experiences* (TE), which Paul defines as experiences that are both *epistemically* and *personally transformative* (Paul 2014, 17). An *epistemically transformative* (ET) experience is a new and different kind of experience that you have never had before, which gives you new knowledge or abilities that you could only have gained by having the experience itself (Paul 2014, 10). A *personally transformative* (PT) experience is a type of experience that radically changes your point of view and fundamentally changes your sense of self and how you experience life (Paul 2014, 16).

According to Paul, real-world agents face TEs in the form of many of life's biggest decisions (Paul 2014, 3). Because the outcome of transformative choices will have a significant, lasting impact on our lives, we want to make the best, most rational decision possible. Paul argues that TEs pose a problem for the way we normally want to make these life-changing decisions. She argues that we can't rationally make transformative choices, because an agent facing a transformative choice is epistemically

impoverished in regard to her choices, and doesn't know what a TE phenomenally feels like, what her reaction will be, or how it will change who she is (Paul 2014, 2). Still, it seems to me that in most real-world TEs, agents *can* rationally choose whether or not to have the experience. I believe it is important to take issue with Paul's TE criteria, specifically the criteria for ET experiences. It seems to me that there are very few experiences that a rational human agent cannot have any knowledge of whatsoever, prior to having the experience itself. It may be true that agents can't know *exactly* what it'll be like to have a TE, but I argue that agents can know *something* of what it's like to have a TE, and this is sufficient to show that ET experiences and TE experiences aren't as relevant to everyday, big decisions as Paul leads us to believe.

Paul assumes that when faced with transformative choices, we want to use the normative standard for decision-making (Paul 2014, 31). She proposes a normative decision theory, which tells agents to assign expected values to each act and choose the act with the highest expected value (Paul 2014, 32). There are many factors that determine an agent's expected value of an act, including values concerning morals, other agents' wellbeing, etc. But Paul is mainly concerned with subjective decision-making, in which you make a decision from your first personal, phenomenally conscious point of view and choose the act that will have the highest subjective value (Paul 2014, 24-5). Paul believes that the transformative choices are major decisions about "who we want to become and how we want to get there," and thus we want our first personal values to be at the center of our decision-making (Paul 2014, 26).

Paul defines *subjective values* (SVs) as first-person, intrinsic, first-order values that are grounded in experience (Paul 2014, 12). In order for an agent to assign SV to an



experience, she must know what it's like to have that experience, including the phenomenal and nonphenomenal features of that experience (Paul 2014, 12). But if an agent can't know anything about what a TE is like prior to having the experience, then she can't assign SV to the experience. Thus Paul wonders, “whether it is even *possible* for real world agents to meet an acceptable rational, normative standard when making certain epistemically and personally transformative decisions from the subjective point of view” (Paul 2014, 20).

I argue that an agent *can* know something about what a TE is like prior to having the experience. I set aside the PT aspect of TEs to focus on the necessary condition that an experience must be ET in order to be a TE. Paul's argument rests on the premise that TEs are both ET and PT, but it is not true that TEs are ET, except in very rare cases. Ruth Chang's “Transformative Choice” asserts that Paul's premise that *an agent can't know anything about what an ET experience is like* can be understood in two senses (Chang 2015, 246). The strong interpretation is that an agent can't have *any knowledge at all* of what an ET is like prior to having the experience (Chang 2015, 246). The weak interpretation is that an agent can't have *complete knowledge* of what an ET is like prior to having the experience (Chang 2015, 246). But, she can have *some knowledge* of what the ET experience is like, and this knowledge is sufficient to assign SV to the experience (Chang 2015, 246). Paul's argument that agents can't make rational choices when they involve TEs follows only from the strong interpretation. However, she is only entitled to the weak interpretation. My aim in this thesis is to show that the vast majority of real-world experiences aren't ET, and thus not TE. Therefore real-world agents *can* make rational choices when faced with some of life's biggest decisions.

## Chapter One: Paul's Triumvirate

To understand Paul's argument, we must first understand her criteria for TE. Paul uses thought experiments to demonstrate the structure of transformative choices that real-world agents face in ordinary decision-making (Paul 2014, 50). The triumvirate includes the experiences of Ordinary Mary, becoming a vampire, and having a child. Paul's triumvirate gives us a better idea of what it means for an experience to be a TE, and why agents can't assign SV to TEs before undergoing the TE. After understanding what real-world TEs entail, we can clarify Paul's criteria for ET and PT experiences and assess whether real-world experiences, as illustrated in the triumvirate, really meet the TE criteria.

### Ordinary Mary

This thought experiment, which I'll call "Ordinary Mary," is based on Jackson's thought experiment about Mary, who has lived in a black-and-white room since birth and doesn't know what it's like to see color before leaving her room, even though she's a super-scientist who knows all there is to know about the science of color experience (Jackson 1986, 291). Unlike Jackson's Mary, Paul's Ordinary Mary isn't a super-

scientist.<sup>1</sup> Ordinary Mary has only her friends' testimony and contemporary science to give her an idea of what seeing color is like (Paul 2014, 9). Paul asserts that contemporary science does not give us a complete account of a first-person physical experience of the world. Thus real-world decision-makers are in the same epistemic situation of Ordinary Mary; knowing all there is to know from contemporary science about the world can't completely give an agent knowledge about what her first-person perspective of the world will be like.

Paul uses Ordinary Mary as her main example of an ET experience. Ordinary Mary's "epistemic poverty" about what it's like to see red prior to leaving her black-and-white room is analogous to an agent's impoverished epistemic situation when facing a transformative choice (Paul 2014, 10). Paul's Ordinary Mary thought experiment demonstrates that knowledge that was once inaccessible to you at one time can become accessible to you at a later time, a main characteristic of TEs. Paul asserts that Ordinary Mary's experience is ET because before she left her room, Ordinary Mary didn't know what it's like to see red, or any other color for that matter; the knowledge of what it's like to see color was inaccessible to her. Before leaving her room, seeing color was a new and different type of experience for Ordinary Mary. Paul acknowledges that we can "fine grain experiences," to the extent that all experiences are new to us and can count as ET in some way (Paul 2014, 11). For example, we can fine-grain experiences so that the slightest differences in our everyday experience constitute a new and different

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<sup>1</sup> Also unlike Jackson's thought experiment, Paul doesn't aim to take a stance on physicalism with her Ordinary Mary thought experiment (Paul 2014, 9). Paul's Ordinary Mary thought experiment avoids the physicalism debate by solely acknowledging that Ordinary Mary gains some type of knowledge when she leaves her room, whether physical or not (Paul 2014, 9).

experience, and thus an ET experience. However, she points out that understanding experiences in this way is uninteresting; if we fine-grained experiences, then *all* experiences could be considered to be ET. If all our experiences are transformative, then this appears to be a reduction of Paul's concept of ET experiences and would miss the implications of her theory of TE that she seeks to discuss. According to Paul, it makes more sense to look at experiences in a coarse-grained way to see how experiences that are clearly transformative affect our rational decision-making ability. Gaining a new sensory ability (Paul 2014, 6), getting married (Paul 2014, 94), and pursuing a medical career (Paul 2014, 98) are examples of coarse-grained experiences that Paul believes are clearly ET. Paul asserts that the examples of ET experiences that she focuses on in her book are clearly transformative, coarse-grained examples of ET experiences. She notes that in some cases, the distinction between distinguishing an ET experience from a non-ET experience "might be a matter of degree" (Paul 2014, 11). But the examples I'll use in my paper are what Paul considers to be coarse-grained examples of ET experiences.

After leaving her black-and-white room, Ordinary Mary learns how it phenomenally feels to see red, gains new abilities to cognitively entertain certain contents concerning color, and learns to understand things in a new way (Paul 2014, 10). She also knows how she reacts to seeing color, and is able to imagine and envision what it is like to see color, which she couldn't know or do before. The knowledge of what it's like to see color became accessible to her after leaving her room and experiencing seeing color for herself, and only could have been accessible to her by having the experience itself.

Ordinary Mary's epistemic poverty prior to leaving her room illustrates the impossibility for an agent facing a transformative choice to assign SV to the TE. Because

“what it’s like” knowledge of seeing red isn’t accessible to Ordinary Mary prior to leaving her room, she can’t assign the experience a SV. This value includes “the purely qualitative value of what it is like to see red along with what it is like for her to have this possibly thrilling, or perhaps frightening, new experience” (Paul 2014, 13). Only after experiencing and accessing what it’s like to see red is Ordinary Mary able to know the phenomenal feeling and her response to that feeling, and then use her knowledge to rationally assign the experience a SV. Other sources of knowledge about what it’s like to have an experience do not give an agent an accurate first-person account of what an experience is like that is essential to her ability to make a rational choice.

While Paul primarily uses her Ordinary Mary thought experiment to show the structure of ET experiences, she doesn’t explicitly explore how Ordinary Mary’s experience could be PT. Paul alludes to the possible PT nature of seeing red for the first time, hypothesizing that the new “emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions” that Ordinary Mary will experience due to seeing red will “change her preferences about seeing color” (Paul 2014, 76). Yet she doesn’t postulate to what extent her preferences and point of view will change, and if these changes are enough to be PT.

Ordinary Mary’s experience also exemplifies Paul’s real-life examples of TEs concerning “dramatic sensory changes in individuals with disabilities,” such as cochlear implants and retinol surgery, surgeries that restore or grant an individual with hearing or seeing capabilities, respectively (Paul 2014, 56). Paul labels these cases of sensory experiences as TEs, and thus are PT (Paul 2014, 70). Paul asserts that choosing a cochlear implant, “involves choices concerning acts that lead to deep, extensive personal transformations resulting in fundamental changes in personal preferences” (Paul 2014,

103). One could argue that choosing a cochlear implant is a parallel experience to Ordinary Mary choosing to leave her black-and-white room, and thus Ordinary Mary's experience could be PT as well. Just as a deaf agent facing the choice of whether to have a cochlear implant hasn't yet experienced what it's like to hear sound, before leaving her room, Ordinary Mary hasn't yet experienced what it's like to see color. A significant part of both the agent's and Ordinary Mary's sensory abilities were inaccessible to them, and their transformative choices present them with the opportunity to experience what they've been missing out on. It's plausible to argue that like the deaf agent, Ordinary Mary would also have "dramatically new kinds of experiences and undergo significant personal changes" (Paul 2014, 103). If seeing red is a PT as well as an ET experience, then Ordinary Mary undergoes a TE when she leaves her black-and-white room and sees red for the first time.

### Becoming a Vampire

At the opening of her book, Paul introduces the thought experiment of a human faced with the choice of becoming a vampire. She asserts that as a vampire, "you'll gain immortal strength, speed and power, and you'll look fantastic in everything you wear. You'll also need to drink blood and avoid sunlight" (Paul 2014, 1). The vampire Paul describes is akin to Stephanie Meyer's vampires in her *Twilight* novel, so I'll use Meyer's description of vampire traits and lifestyles to develop Paul's example. In Meyer's *Twilight*, one becomes a vampire by being bitten by a vampire (Meyer 2007). Vampires are immortal, have superhuman strength, speed, and senses, pale skin that sparkles in the

sunlight, drink (mostly animal) blood, never sleep, aren't harmed by garlic or sunlight like Dracula and other fictional vampires, and can only be killed by being dismembered and burned (something human strength is not capable of) (Meyer 2007). According to Paul, becoming a vampire is a TE. Once you are bitten, you'll know what you couldn't have known about being a vampire when you were a human: the phenomenal feel of being a vampire and how you react to being a vampire instead of a human (Paul 2014, 50). According to Paul, becoming a vampire is certainly ET. An agent's transformation into a vampire gives her access to knowledge and abilities that only vampires know and can exercise, which is why she couldn't have known or exercised those things before as a human. As a vampire, she experiences the world through the first-person perspective of a vampire; she can see, smell, and hear things her human senses couldn't pick up before, and knows how it phenomenally feels to crave blood and never feel sleep-deprived. The agent also knows how she reacts to being a vampire. Perhaps she's thrilled to be a member of the undead and prefers being a vampire to being a human, or conversely wishes she were still a human. Needless to say, with these new physical and physiological changes, the agent's everyday life experience has changed dramatically as well (Paul 2014, 1).

Paul understands becoming a vampire to be a PT experience as well as an ET experience. Inevitably, a human-turned-vampire will have new beliefs, emotions, desires, and preferences other than just wanting to drink blood. Since vampires don't sleep and never die, time has a different meaning for the agent, now that she has an infinite amount of waking hours. Her experience of time and how she spends and values her time has fundamentally changed. There's no rush to cross things off her bucket list, as she's never

going to kick the bucket. As a vampire, she prefers to spend the majority of her time with her vampire friends and visits her family less often, in fear that she'll lose self-control and make them her dinner, therefore seriously changing the nature of her relationships with her family and loved ones. Since her human capacities have been replaced by vampire capacities, the agent experiences life from the point of view of a vampire, which has radically altered her personal identity and experience of the world.

Paul acknowledges that real-world agents may never realistically face the decision whether or not to become a vampire, but that's not the point of the thought experiment. Paul states, "the point of examining the choice of whether to become a vampire is that the structure of transformative choice is reflected in *any* choice that is both epistemically and personally transformative with respect to one's preferences" (Paul 2014, 50). The thought experiment of becoming a vampire illustrates what Paul identifies as the life-changing implications of TEs, in which agents considering TEs are forced to "contemplate how to make sense of a decision to become an unknown, dramatically changed, new self" (Paul 2014, 51).

### Having a Child

Paul considers the decision to have a child as another transformative choice that real-world agents face in everyday life. I believe the best version of Paul's having a child thought experiment is her argument about a biological mother's experience of having a child for the first time, so a biological mother will be the agent that I refer to in my paper. For Paul, the experience of having a child includes "the experience of physically



producing an infant, its immediate aftermath, and the extended experience of raising this child from infancy to adulthood” (Paul 2014, 72). From now on, when I refer to the experience of having a child, I will be referring to the collected experiences of pregnancy, giving birth, and raising a child.

According to Paul, a biological mother-to-be is in an “epistemic situation like that of Ordinary Mary before she leaves her black-and-white room” (Paul 2014, 76). Like Ordinary Mary, before an agent has a child, she “faces a deep subjective unpredictability about the future” in which she cannot know how it phenomenally feels to have a child of her own, or “the emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions” that will be caused by having a child (Paul 2014, 76). Hearing descriptions and testimony about what it’s like to have a child, having nieces and nephews, or changing diapers can’t adequately inform an agent about what it’s like to have a child of her own, just as knowing the science of what it’s like to see color can’t teach Ordinary Mary what it’s like for her to see red (Paul 2014, 77). Thus according to Paul, an agent deciding whether or not to have a child suffers from the same type of epistemic poverty as Ordinary Mary prior to leaving her room.

Why is having a child a unique epistemic experience? Paul cites various phenomenological aspects of having a child as evidence. The experience of pregnancy itself is “unlike any other human experience,” according to Paul (Paul 2014, 77). Physically, the mother has never experienced another human being growing inside her or produced a baby through the birth process (Paul 2014, 77). Paul states that the mother also experiences new hormonal and physiological states that she’s never experienced before becoming pregnant, and could only experience during pregnancy. The new

hormonal and physiological states that the mother experiences throughout pregnancy and giving birth help create “the physical realizers for the intensely emotional phenomenology associated with the birth” (Paul 2014, 78). Paul calls this intense emotional phenomenology the “attachment relation” between the mother and child (Paul 2014, 78). The mother’s strong initial feelings of love for her newborn immediately after giving birth continue to develop into a strong attachment relation between her and her child as time goes on, and is a relationship unlike any other she’s experienced before (Paul 2014, 79). This parent-child relationship is built on what Paul calls “parental love,” a “special, intense, and distinctive” type of love (Paul 2014, 79).

In support of what Paul claims, psychologist Erich Fromm differentiates between fatherly love and motherly love, and gives us an account of two aspects of motherly love that set it apart from other types of love: the unconditional affirmation of the child’s needs necessary for the “preservation of the child’s life and his growth” and the attitude “which instills in the child a love for living” (Fromm 1956, 44-5). According to Fromm, “in contrast to brotherly love and erotic love which are love between equals, the relationship of mother and child is by its very nature one of inequality, where one needs all the help, and the other gives it” (Fromm 1956, 45). For Fromm, “in erotic love, two people who were separate become one. In motherly love, two people who were one become separate” (Fromm 1956, 47).

A potential biological mother may already know what it’s like to experience different types of love, such as love between friends or love for a pet. But experience of other types of love won’t give her any knowledge about what it’s like to experience motherly love; according to Paul, “experiencing parental love for the first time is

epistemically analogous to seeing for the first time, or hearing for the first time” (Paul 2014, 81). Dramatically new and different phenomenal feelings attached to experiences of having a child, such as what it’s like to undergo physical and hormonal changes and feel parental love, as well as an agent’s attitudes and emotional reactions to those feelings, are all part of what makes having a child an ET experience.

Paul notes that “what it’s like” to have a child has two distinct ET aspects: (1) the kind of experience involved in the experience of having a child (2) “the kind of experience involved in having a child of the particular sort that you actually end up having” (Paul 2014, 78). The kind of experience involved in having a child of the particular sort that you actually end up having is also an important part of the ET experience of having a child, according to Paul. The biological mother-to-be can’t know what it’s like to be a mother before becoming pregnant, and she can’t know what it’s like to be the parent of the particular child she will produce (Paul 2014, 80). The inability to know the “distinctive traits of any particular child” and the fact that it’s *your* child make it clear that raising your child will be ET (Paul 2014, 78). For Paul, this is especially notable because the traits of the particular child you produce will have a large effect on your experiences as a parent, such as your child’s “dispositions and inclinations, her health and physical abilities, and her cognitive and emotional makeup,” (Paul 2014, 80).

If your attachment relation to your child “is sufficiently strong, the experience is personally transformative” as well (Paul 2014, 82). According to Paul, the feelings of parental love and the bond you forge with your child is what makes becoming a parent transformative for so many mothers (Paul 2014, 81). Fromm’s account of motherly love supports Paul’s argument, as he notes that a mother “transcends herself in the infant, her

love for it gives her life meaning and significance” (Fromm 1956, 46). Fromm believes that a basic human need is the satisfaction from the role of being “the creator,” which is satisfied for a mother through her “care and love for her creation” (Fromm 1956, 46). For example, a parent may choose to put her child’s needs ahead of her own when before she always put her needs first. Her time spent with her child is spent teaching her child about the world and her time spent without her child is spent worrying about her child’s wellbeing and safety. Instead of prioritizing saving money for a new car, she is motivated to provide for her child and give her the most materially comfortable life possible. For Paul, parental love is at the core of the changes in an agent’s personal emotions, beliefs, desires, and preferences, and what makes having a child a PT experience.

Unlike the Ordinary Mary, having a child is a TE that extends over time. Seeing red for the first time is transformative at the time of the experience itself. After Ordinary Mary experiences what it’s like to see color for the first time, the extent of the experience’s transformative nature is over. When Ordinary Mary steps outside of her black-and-white room, she can only experience seeing red for the first time once, and over a short period of time continues to see different colors for the first time. But having a child is an extended experience. Seeing color for the first time is an experience that lasts for a number of seconds. Having a child is an experience that lasts for a number of years.<sup>2</sup> Thus having a child illustrates the structure of TEs that extend over a period of time or occurs at a time much later than the time that the transformative choice was made (Paul 2014, 94). A biological mother’s experiences raising her child continue to involve transformative changes, particularly due to her attachment relation to her child. Paul

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<sup>2</sup> Within the “having a child” thought experiment that Paul proposes, which you can recall includes pregnancy, birth, and raising your child into adulthood.

states, “the extended experience of raising a child, the kind of experience that is had by biological...parents, and one where a person becomes a parent in the fullest sense of the word, is itself epistemically and personally transformative” (Paul 2014, 97). Over time, being a parent “changes both the way that you respond to the events that arise in your life and the sorts of events you may have to face,” due to your experience of parental love (Paul 2014, 98). These changes in your sense of self and experience of life radically impact how you live your life in the short- and long-term.

We now have a better understanding of Paul’s triumvirate, and have seen the characteristics of real-world experiences that Paul labels TEs. Her triumvirate mirrors what agents face in decisions involving TEs. All agents considering a transformative choice are in the same epistemically impoverished situation due to the ET aspect of TEs and must face the unknowable PT nature of how the TE will fundamentally change who we are. My next task will be to clarify Paul’s criteria for ET and PT experiences so that we can later assess whether Paul’s triumvirate meets the criteria for TEs.

## Chapter Two: Transformative Experience Criteria

Working from Paul's definitions of ET and PT experiences and what her triumvirate tells us about what constitutes a TE, we can pull out Paul's criteria for TEs. Paul notes that an experience can be ET but not PT, or PT and not ET. For example, eating durian fruit for the first time is an experience that is ET but not PT (Paul 2014, 17), and participating in a revolution is a PT but not ET experience (Paul 2014, 16). But what Paul is most interested in are experiences that are both ET and PT, and therefore TEs.

Once we have a comprehensive understanding of Paul's TE criteria and the experiences that she believes meet the criteria, we can see that real-world experiences very rarely meet the TE criteria, and thus TEs aren't problematic for the normative standard way we want to make big, life-changing decisions in the way that Paul believes them to be. But first, we'll clarify the criteria for ET and PT experiences and TEs.

### Epistemically Transformative (ET) Experiences

Paul states that ET experiences are experiences that an agent can't know what they're like before having the actual experience (Paul 2014, 32). ET experiences change an agent's subjective point of view and give her new knowledge and abilities that she could only gain by having the experience itself.

From Paul's definition and information from the triumvirate, we can lay out criteria for ET experiences. Both of the following conditions are necessary in order for an experience to be ET:

ET1: The experience is a new and different type of experience that you have never had before.

ET2: The experience gives you access to new information and the capacity to exercise cognitive abilities that you could not have otherwise accessed, including how you react to this type of experience and the ability to entertain new ideas and/or understand things in a new way.

#### Personally Transformative (PT) Experiences

Paul states that PT experiences dramatically change what it is like for you to be you. An experience is PT if it "changes you enough to substantially change your point of view, thus substantially revising your core preferences or revising how you experience being yourself" (Paul 2014, 16).

From Paul's definition, we can lay out a criterion for PT experiences. The following condition is necessary for an experience to be PT:

PT1: The experience fundamentally changes your subjective point of view. Your personal preferences and sense of self are radically revised.

## Transformative Experiences (TEs)

According to Paul, “having a TE teaches you something new, something that you could not have known before having the experience, while also changing you as a person” (Paul 2014, 17).

From Paul’s definition, we can lay out criteria for TEs by combining the criteria for ET and PT experiences:

ET1: The experience is a new and different type of experience that you have never had before.

ET2: The experience gives you access to new information and the capacity to exercise cognitive abilities that you could not have otherwise accessed, including how you react to this type of experience and the ability to entertain new ideas and/or understand things in a new way.

PT1: The experience fundamentally changes your subjective point of view. Your personal preferences and sense of self are radically revised.

The outcome of the ET aspect of the experience is that you learn something new and different as the result of the experience. The outcome of the PT aspect of the experience is that it gives you a new, revised sense of self, which includes changes in your emotions, beliefs, desires, preferences, etc. With both the ET and PT aspects, a TE a TE teaches you something new and different about the world and yourself, which you couldn’t have known if you didn’t have the TE.

There are important questions to be asked of Paul’s TE criteria. Do the real-world experiences that Paul exemplifies in the triumvirate really meet the TE criteria? And if



not, what does this mean for Paul's argument about agents' ability to make rational choices when they involve TEs? It seems difficult to believe that real-world agents facing transformative choices are as epistemically impoverished as Paul's ET criteria lead us to believe. A closer look at the epistemic situation of agents in real-world transformative choices reveal that real-world experiences are not ET, except in very unusual cases. The next chapter will make the case that real-world, life-changing experiences aren't ET, and thus not TE.

### Chapter III: Real-world Transformative Experiences

Paul's triumvirate and TE criteria rest on the premise that TEs are ET, but I think that this premise is false, except in very rare cases. According to Paul, *an agent can't know anything about what an ET experience is like* (Paul 2014, 32). Chang shows us that there are two ways to understand Paul's premise: a strong interpretation and a weak interpretation (Chang 2015, 246). Under the strong interpretation, an agent can't have *any knowledge at all* of what an ET is like prior to having the experience and under the weak interpretation, an agent can't have *complete knowledge* of what an ET is like prior to having the experience, but she can have *some knowledge* of what it's like (Chang 2015, 246). Paul's conclusion that agents facing transformative choices can't rationally choose whether or not to have a TE only follows if the strong interpretation is true. But I argue that the strong interpretation is false. Even if the weak interpretation is true, Paul's argument fails to hold. We can then conclude that agents can make rational choices when it comes to decisions involving TEs.

#### Strong Interpretation

The strong interpretation that an agent can't have *any knowledge at all* of what an ET is like prior to having the experience is false. With some help from Chang, we can

show that the weak interpretation that an agent can have *some knowledge* of what an ET experience is like is true for all real-life experiences, except in very rare cases.

Chang argues that an agent can have *some* knowledge of what it's like to have the experience before she has it. According to Chang, this is possible in three ways: if the experience involves the exercise of basic capacities that the agent has exercised before, if the experience falls under a "type" of experience that the agent has experienced before, and if the agent receives reliable testimonial evidence (Chang 2015, 247).

First, if an experience involves the familiar exercise of basic capacities that the agent has exercised before, an agent can have *some* knowledge of what that experience is like. Chang's intuitive notion of basic capacities of rational human agents includes the exercise of sight. Although seeing red isn't a basic capacity, seeing red involves the exercise of the basic capacity of seeing, which Ordinary Mary has exercised before. Since the experience of seeing red directly involves the basic capacity of seeing, which is familiar to Ordinary Mary, she has *some* knowledge of what it's like to see red prior to actually having the experience.

Unlike seeing red for the first time and having a child, becoming a vampire doesn't involve the exercise of basic human capacities, but rather the exercise of basic vampire capacities (Chang 2015, 251). Thus it's plausible that becoming a vampire is one of the rare experiences that fall under the ET criteria. Even Paul admits that becoming a vampire isn't a choice that real-world agents face, and so we can set it aside until we prove that becoming a vampire is a rare case of an ET experience (Paul 2014, 50).

The experience of having a child includes the exercise of basic capacities that an agent is familiar with prior to having a child (Chang 2015, 249). Paul argues that one of

the central ET aspects of having a child is the knowledge and abilities an agent gains about what it's like to feel "parental love." I argue that Chang's account of basic capacities includes the capacity of a rational human agent to feel and express emotion. There are numerous philosophical theories of love, and the theory that Paul seems to follow is that of love as emotion complex.<sup>3</sup> The emotion complex theory of love asserts that love is a complex emotional attitude that one agent feels towards another agent (Helm 2013). According to this theory, an agent's love for another agent is developed through *historicity*, which is the sum of the interactions between both agents (Helm 2013). The emotion complex theory touches on the transformative nature of the experience of love, as the emotionally complex historicity of love, "involves the lover's being permanently transformed by loving who he does" (Helm 2013). Thus if parental love is a type of love and thus an emotion, then an agent's experience of parental love also is grounded in the familiar exercise of the basic capacity for emotion.

Paul argues that even if an agent has nieces and nephews, has changed diapers and babysat, or cared for much younger siblings, she still can't know what it's like to experience parental love (Paul 2015, 77). But I disagree. If an agent has exercised her capacity to love through the exercise of her basic capacity of emotion, then she can have at least *some* knowledge of what it's like to experience parental love. Paul can still argue that parental love is radically different than any other love an agent has felt before, but she must concede that an agent can know *something* about what it's like to exercise parental love, even if it's only a small amount of knowledge. Thus even experiences that

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<sup>3</sup> The emotion complex theory of love is complicated, but I'll summarize the aspects of the theory that are important to this thesis.

we might consider to be substantially new and different to us are not as epistemically unknowable as we think.

Second, an experience can belong to a “type” of experience that the agent has experienced before (Chang 2015, 247). According to Chang, humans have different subjective responses to exercising their capacities. The range of human subjective responses can be categorized into different types of human experiences (for example, “emotionally neutral,” “thrilling,” etc.) (Chang 2015, 247). Because human experiences are subjective, an experience can fall under different types of experiences for different agents (for example, an experience can be “emotionally neutral” type of experience for some, while “thrilling” for others). Chang reasons that every possible human experience can be classified under a range of types that we could put into a matrix (Chang 2015, 247). An agent could look up the ET experience in the matrix and see the range of types that it falls under for humans (Chang 2015, 247). If the ET experience falls under a type of experience that includes other experiences she’s had before, then she would have some knowledge of what the ET experience would be like for her (Chang 2015, 247).

Prior to leaving her black-and-white room, Ordinary Mary could look up and see which “types” of experience seeing red falls under for rational human agents. If seeing red falls under a type of experience that includes other experiences that she’s had, then she can have some knowledge about what it’s like to see red (Chang 2015, 247). For example, if the range of types of experience seeing red falls under emotionally neutral and thrilling types of experiences, and Ordinary Mary has had both emotionally neutral and thrilling experiences before, then she can know what seeing red is like (Chang 2015, 247). Even though Ordinary Mary doesn’t know which type of experience seeing red falls

under, she has *some* knowledge of what it's like to see red through the knowledge that seeing red falls under types of experiences that she's had before.

Can becoming a vampire belong to a "type" of experience that the agent has experienced before as well? Paul's thought experiment of becoming a vampire falls under a range of types of human experiences because at the time of the transformation, the agent is a human. Thus theoretically, becoming a vampire is an experience that would fall under a range of types of human experiences. However, the problem is that no human has ever become a vampire before (that we know of), and thus we wouldn't know which type it would fall under, giving us further reason to believe that becoming a vampire would be a rare case of an ET experience.

Having a child is also an experience that can be categorized under a range of types of experiences that an agent has most likely had before. Just as Ordinary Mary could look up the range of types that their ET experience falls under, a potential mother could do the same for the experience of having a child. According to Paul, having a child "is usually very intense," (Paul 2014, 81). It seems that for Paul, having a child falls under "very intense" types of experiences. The very nature of having a child, which for Paul centers on parental love, also seems to indicate that having a child usually falls under types of experiences that we might call "love-filled" or "emotionally charged" types of experiences.

Lastly, an agent can receive reliable testimonial evidence from another agent that shares the same physiological and psychological properties with the agent. In the best-case scenario, let's say that an agent finds her physiological and psychological doppelganger. According to Chang, if the testimony an agent receives is reliable and

from another agent that shares the same physiological and psychological properties, then at a minimum, the testimony gives the agent some knowledge of “what an experience is thought to be like after having it” (Chang 2015, 247). Even though Paul may respond that testimonial evidence from others can’t inform our own subjective, “authentic” first-personal perspective (Paul 2014, 77), Chang argues that testimonial evidence gives an agent some knowledge of what it might be like for her to have an experience, based on how similar she is to her doppelganger who gave her the testimony (Chang 2014, 248). The knowledge that the agent gains may not be knowledge about how the experience will phenomenally feel for her, but it is knowledge about the attitudes or emotional responses that an agent is thought to have due to the experience. And as we know, the attitudes and emotional responses of an experience fall under Paul’s understanding of “what it’s like” knowledge. Therefore an agent can receive some “what it’s like” knowledge about an experience through reliable testimonial evidence. Ordinary Mary can ask her doppelgangers who had already ventured out of their black-and-white rooms what it was like to see red for the first time. An agent can ask her friends that used to be her human doppelgangers, what their transformation into a vampire was like. A potential mother can talk to her mother and friends who are her doppelgangers in the relevant respects, what their having a child experience was like.

However, Paul fundamentally disagrees with Chang about the nature of testimony and its relevance in helping agents make rational choices. Paul finds testimony to be problematic in two main respects: testimony is “notoriously unreliable” and you can’t know the relevant physiological and psychological similarities between you and the doppelganger giving you the testimony that would allow you to assess the relevance of

their testimony to your experience (Paul 2014, 89). Conversely, Chang finds testimony to be largely relevant and reliable. If it's true that there exists a set of basic capacities that rational human agents exercise on a regular basis and that all human experiences can be categorized under ranges of types of experiences, then it's very plausible that testimonial evidence can give an agent knowledge about what an experience is thought to be like. Paul seems to rely on the assumption that subjective human experience varies so widely and deeply that another's experience can't inform our own in any meaningful way. But this seems unlikely. Paul herself even acknowledges that there are some cases that we don't have to know what they're like to experience in order to know their SV, such as being eaten by a shark. Just as we can know that being eaten by a shark falls under a range of undesirable types of experiences for humans, we can also know that seeing red for the first time or having a child falls under a range of types of human experiences, and these experiences are reflected in testimonial evidence. Because no human has ever become a vampire before in the real world, it's plausible that no human could give an agent reliable testimony about having become a vampire. But theoretically if the choice to become a vampire was a choice that real-world agents face, it follows that agents could give reliable testimonial evidence to those facing the transformative choice of becoming a vampire. Thus Chang seems correct in assuming that agents facing experiences we might consider to be ET are less epistemically impoverished than Paul believes them to be.

I think there's also a fourth way that an agent can gain knowledge of an ET experience prior to having the experience: imagination. Paul argues that before having a TE, you don't have the imaginative capacity to accurately imagine what it would be like to have the TE. For an agent considering whether to have a child, Paul argues, "what it's



like” knowledge about having a child is knowledge that requires experience. And because the knowledge requires experience, before having the experience itself, an agent can’t “successfully project forward into her subjective future and imaginatively represent what it’s like” (Paul 2014, 10).

However, I disagree that a potential biological mother must have “the relevant sort of prior experience” in order to imaginatively represent what it’s like for her to have a child. In “How Imagination Gives Rise to Knowledge,” Amy Kind argues, “an imaginer [can] be provided with new information by an imagining that contains nothing but what she put in it” (Kind 2013, 17). Kind shows that imagination can amount to justified belief, and thus be informative for the imaginer when an agent sets and abides by the right constraints in her imagining (Kind 2013, 19). Kind calls this “imagining under constraints,” which is defined as imagining constrained by reality. She cites examples of Nikola Tesla and Temple Grandin, two real-life individuals who use their powers of visual imagination and “imagining under constraints” in their work (Kind 2013, 2-3). Tesla and Grandin are able to control their imaginations when figuring out how their inventions would work in reality by mentally imagining their inventions within the physical constraints of the world. It may be true that your imaginings are subject to your own will, and that your belief based on these imaginings can contain only what was put into it, but our imaginings can still provide us with new information that we are justified in believing (Kind 2013, 17). Thus a potential mother “imagine under constraints” to represent what it’s like for her to have a child, without actually experiencing having a child. A rational human agent has exercised basic capacities before within the reality of our world, and thus can use her knowledge from exercising her basic capacities to

“imagine under constraints.” For example, a potential biological mother can use her experience of the basic capacity of loving to imagine what it’s like to have a child and experience parental love for her child. If it’s true that one’s imagination can lead to justified belief, then it’s possible to have knowledge about a TE under the strong interpretation, without having the experiencing itself.

We now can see that the strong interpretation of Paul’s premise is false for Paul’s triumvirate. The strong interpretation of Paul’s premise is also false for the vast majority of experiences that real-life agents encounter in transformative choices.

Sensory experiences akin to that of Ordinary Mary, which we might consider ET at first glance, fall outside of the class of ET experiences. Cochlear implants and retinol surgery, two of Paul’s other thought experiments featuring sensory transformations, are not ET. It is not the case that all candidates for cochlear implants have never exercised the basic capacity of hearing before getting an implant. Many real-world candidates have a cochlear implant to *restore* their sense of hearing or because they are hard-of-hearing (NIDCD). Thus these agents have experienced exercising the basic capacity to hear before, even if in a limited way. For the candidates for cochlear implants who are deaf and have been so since birth, the experience of getting a cochlear implant would be ET, if not for the fact that those candidates could still gain some knowledge about the experience of hearing via our matrix of human responses to such experiences or reliable testimonial experience.

The goal of retinol surgery is to prevent or reverse vision loss (WebMD). Thus real-world retinol surgery candidates have all exercised the basic capacity of seeing in some capacity before having the surgery, and having retinol surgery isn’t an ET

experience. Oliver Sacks' 1993 New Yorker article, "To See and Not See" recounts the curious case of Virgil, a man whom Sacks describes as blind since childhood, yet miraculously regains his sight after surgery on his cataracts (Sacks 1993, 59). But after a closer inspection of Virgil's case, despite his "thick cataracts" and "retinol pigmentosa," he is still able to "see light and dark, the direction from which light came, and the shadow of a hand moving in front of his eyes" (Sacks 1993, 59). Under the strong interpretation of Virgil's epistemic poverty in regards to his ability to see, prior to regaining his sight, he still has knowledge of what it's like to see because he is able to exercise his basic capacity to see, even though it's in a limited way. Even the *de novo* exercise of a basic capacity, such as hearing or seeing for the first time, isn't ET for real-world agents.

Other experiences in which the basic capacity to exercise the five traditional senses is central to the "what it's like" experience of the agent also turn out to be non-ET for real-world agents. Paul uses the thought experiment of eating a new food for the first time, such as durian fruit or vegemite, as cases of epistemic transformation (Paul 2014, 35). The taste, smell, texture, and even sight of durian and vegemite are new and different experiences that an agent who has never tasted them before can't know or imagine before actually eating them, according to Paul (Paul 36). But as we've seen with the case of Ordinary Mary, cochlear implants, and retinol surgery, if an agent has already experienced exercising the basic capacity that is central to the experience, then the experience is not ET. Agents trying durian or vegemite have exercised the basic capacity to taste before, and so these types of experiences aren't ET.

Even experiences that are more strongly intuitively ET do not fall meet Paul's ET criteria. Getting married, having a child, and enlisting in the military all involve the

exercise of familiar basic capacities, can be categorized under a type of human experience, are responsive to testimonial evidence about what they'd be like, and can be imagined under constraints (Chang 2015, 252). Therefore, the vast majority of real-world, big, life-changing experiences that ordinary agents face are not ET, except in very rare cases.

There are some experiences that are true under the strong interpretation, but these experiences are rare and unusual. The class of experiences that an agent can't know anything whatsoever about what it's like to have are cases in which, "the only experiences involving *solely* the de novo exercise of a basic capacity that hasn't been exercised much by humans before" (Chang 2015, 251). And there seem to be very few experiences that fall into the class of ET experiences. Becoming a vampire or a bat most appear to meet the ET criteria, as both experiences most likely involve the de novo exercise of basic capacities that humans have never exercised before (Chang 2015, 251). It's conceivable to think that as humans, we can't know what it's like to be another species, such as a vampire or a bat. Even Paul recognizes the absurdity of real-world agents facing choices such as becoming a vampire. She acknowledges that "the choice to become a vampire is bizarre and otherworldly," and argues that the point of the thought experiment is to illustrate the "structure of transformative choice," which is reflected in choices that real-life agents face (Paul 2014, 50). It turns out that the choice to become a vampire *is* bizarre and otherworldly, but so are all experiences that are ET. There are very, very few experiences unlike any other experience a rational human agent has experienced before.

## Weak Interpretation

By proving the strong interpretation to be false, we have shown that the weak interpretation, that an agent can have *some knowledge* of what an ET experience is like, is true for all real-life experiences, except in very rare cases. We've shown that real-world experiences aren't ET, except in unusual cases, and therefore are not TE. If real-world experiences are not ET and thus not TEs, then is Paul still entitled to her claim that agents can't rationally decide whether or not to have TEs?

I assert that Paul's conclusion doesn't follow from her premises; the knowledge about what ET experiences are like is sufficient to assign SV to an experience. Chang lays out two cases of ET experiences. The first case of ET experiences are those in which the de novo exercise of a basic capacity is so insignificant that even though you haven't exercised that capacity before, you can still assign a rough value to what it's like. For example, a blind person's experience of being hit by a car is an ET experience that the blind person can assign a rough SV to even before being hit by the car (Chang 2015, 250). Even though the blind person has never exercised the basic capacity of sight, she has exercised the basic capacity of touch and thus can assign a rough SV to being hit by a car. The de novo exercise of sight for the blind person is insignificant for her evaluation of this case, while her past experiences exercising her other basic capacities can help her in assigning a rough SV to being hit by a car. Therefore not having experienced a basic capacity that's insignificant to knowing what an experience is like doesn't prevent an agent from having knowledge about the experience or assigning the experience a SV.

The second case of ET experiences are those in which the de novo exercise of a basic capacity is so central to the experience that it appears that you can't know what that experience is like without knowing what it's like to exercise that capacity. Although the experience involves exercising basic capacities that an agent has already experienced, the de novo exercise of a basic capacity that seems so essential to the experience of hearing that an agent can't have "what it's like" knowledge about the experience without having first exercised that basic capacity (Chang 2015, 250). For example, a deaf person has never exercised the basic capacity of hearing. The exercise of the basic capacity of hearing appears to be so central to the experience of hearing Beethoven that it seems that an agent couldn't know what it's like to hear Beethoven in the strong sense of "couldn't know what it's like" without first knowing what it's like to hear. But Chang postulates that the deaf person could use knowledge other than knowledge about hearing to assign a rough value to hearing Beethoven, such the matrix of "types" of experience or testimonial evidence (Chang 2015, 251).<sup>4</sup> Even though Paul's is entitled to the weak interpretation, it's not sufficient to uphold Paul's argument. If an agent can have some knowledge about what an experience will be like for her, and can assign the experience SV based on her knowledge about the experience, then the experience isn't a TE.

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<sup>4</sup> However, Paul explicitly sets asides cases such as being skinned alive and her own example of being eaten by a shark (Paul 2015, 27). Paul asserts that she instead focuses on experiences in which you "are not sure now you'd respond" (Paul 2014, 28). But Chang points out that it seems Paul is stating is ET experiences "can't be assigned a subjective value unless it can be" and "if it can be, she's not interested in it" (Chang 2015, 253).

## Conclusion

This thesis begins by laying out Paul's triumvirate to better understand the situations that she believes real-world agents face when presented with transformative choices. The experiences of Ordinary Mary, a human-turned vampire, and a biological mother demonstrate the ET and PT aspects of TEs. According to Paul, agents facing transformative choices are epistemically impoverished in regards to their choices involving TEs, and face uncertainty about how their experience will change who they are and how they live their lives. Paul believes this makes it impossible for agents to assign SV to TEs because the knowledge about what a TE is like is inaccessible to the agent until after she has the experience. No other source of knowledge about what a TE is like, such as testimony, can tell agents anything about what having a TE will be like for them.

Paul's TE criteria tell us that TEs are ET and PT. Due to the ET aspect of TEs, agents can't know anything about what it's like to have a TE. Due to the PT aspect of TEs, agents face a deep subjective uncertainty about how their point of view, preferences, and sense of self will fundamentally change due to their TE. I choose to set aside the PT aspect of TEs and Paul's premise that TEs are PT. Instead, I argue that Paul's premise that TEs are ET is false. Paul's argument rests on the strong interpretation of ET experiences, but the strong interpretation is false. Instead, the weak interpretation is true. It then follows that agents can know something of what it's like to have an experience

prior to having the experience itself, even if we might intuitively think it involves a life-changing experience that we are largely uncertain about what it would be like to have. And under the weak interpretation, it follows that agents can assign SV to experiences using knowledge about the experience not gained from having the experience itself. Thus I conclude that real-world agents don't face ET experiences in transformative choices, except in rare and unusual cases. Therefore real-life transformative choices don't involve TEs, because ET experiences are necessary to an experience's status as a TE under Paul's criteria.

It follows that when we are faced with life's biggest choices, agents can be confident in their ability to make a rational choice for decisions that involve an experience that will transform them in ways not completely unknown.



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