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Claremont Mckenna College

Representational Roles Considering Transformative  
Experience

Submitted to  
Professor Gabbrielle Johnson

By  
Kallen Mueller

For  
Senior Thesis  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines the potential problems posed by transformational experiences for being a qualified representative. Representational roles would be any role in which someone is tasked with speaking on behalf of others and representing their interests. First, I argue that Transformational experiences pose a potential problem because they create an epistemic barrier to understanding the experiences of others. Understanding the experiences of others is vital to being able to adopt their perspectives and interests. Then I will argue that imaginative scaffolding provides a means for a skilled imaginer to overcome the epistemic gap created by transformative experience in understanding the experiences of others. Then I will argue that knowing the entire scope of someone's transformational experiences is not relevant for providing effective representation. Rather, a representative needs to understand only the perspectives and experiences that are relevant to the specific issue at hand. I will ultimately conclude that although transformative experiences present a potential challenge for people in representative roles, this can be overcome if the representative is aware that the epistemic gap exists and puts in the necessary time and effort into understanding the experiences of the people they are representing.

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## **Introduction**

This thesis uses L.A. Paul's theory of Transformative experience to draw out an argument for why transformational experience poses a problem for people in representational roles. Representational Roles are defined in this paper as someone who speaks on behalf of others and represents their interests. In the first section of this paper, I will outline L.A. Paul's argument for the epistemic inaccessibility of unfamiliar transformative experiences. Paul's argument hinges on the idea that transformative experiences are nontransferable between people. You cannot understand what it is like to undergo a transformative experience without having lived it yourself. I will then be creating an argument that assumes L.A. Paul's theory of Transformational Experience holds true. This argument will demonstrate that if Paul's theory is true, then this poses massive challenges for being a qualified representative of others. Because transformative experiences change some aspect of who we are, these types of experiences are driving forces in shaping our perspectives over the course of our lives. Without being able to understand what another person's transformational experiences are like, it would be impossible to understand how these experiences might alter their perspectives. Given that oftentimes representatives do not share the same transformative experiences as the people that they represent, this epistemic barrier could create significant gaps between the perspectives of the representor and the people being represented. This presents a challenge for those in representational roles because what these people might deem as important for others might not be aligned with their perspective and be what is actually important to them.

In the second section, I will be examining Amy Kind's arguments that we can potentially overcome these epistemic barriers through the technique of imaginative scaffolding. If we are skilled enough with our imagination, we can create accurate reconstructions of unfamiliar transformative experiences to understand what they are like. This is done by taking elements of other experiences and building them on top of one another to create accurate reconstructions of what the experience is like. With enough time, effort, and skill one can come to understand unfamiliar experiences by using imaginative scaffolding. I will use Kind's arguments to attack premise III of the argument which is the assumption that Paul's theory of Transformative Experience is true. I will argue that imaginative scaffolding provides an avenue to deny this premise because it enables us to overcome the epistemic barriers created by transformative experiences. Using this technique allows people in representational roles to overcome the epistemic barrier of transformative experience and be able to access the perspectives and values of the people they are representing.

The third section will rely on arguments from Wendy Salkin to illustrate that people in representational roles do not need to have a holistic understanding of others' experiences in order to make decisions effectively on their behalf. Salkin's arguments on the merit of Judicial Representation for the intellectually disabled serve as a close approximation for other representative roles because it examines the validity of making decisions on behalf of others without their explicit input. This argument serves as a blueprint for what is important when it comes to trying to adopt someone else's

perspective when making decisions on their behalf. Salkin's arguments will be used to deny premise II of the argument that if someone is a qualified representative, then they understand the experiences of others. The important thing is not having a holistic understanding of a person's experiences but rather being able to ascertain what the relevant transformational experiences they have had in relation to the issue in question to better understand the relevant perspectives of the individual. This further enables us to overcome the epistemic challenges presented by the theory of Transformative Experience.

Finally, I will conclude that imaginative scaffolding and narrowing the threshold of understanding needed to be an effective representative eliminate the potential problems posed by the theory of Transformational Experience as long as the representative is cognizant of these ideas. Without an awareness of the dangers that transformational experiences pose for effective representation, it is unlikely that a person will take the necessary steps to overcome the epistemic barrier these experiences create. However, if a representative is aware of the potential experiential gap, then they have the capacity to bridge the gap in understanding the perspectives of the people that they represent.



## **Puzzle of Representational Roles considering Transformative Experience**

I will be arguing that the theory of transformative experience presents a challenge for those in representational roles. According to the theory of transformative experience, there is an epistemic barrier to knowing what it is like to undergo a transformative experience we have not gone through ourselves. This poses an epistemic barrier to truly understanding the perspectives of others. This becomes an issue in the case of representational roles because representing the interests of others requires insights into their perspectives and values. What we might deem as important to them might not actually be what is important for them. In this paper, representational roles will be considered any role in which one speaks on behalf of others and represents their interests. This encompasses many roles such as elected officials, judicial representatives for people who cannot speak on their own behalf, or union representatives. I am concerned with the roles in which one person is responsible for understanding the individualized interests and perspectives of others in their stead. I will argue in this section that understanding the experiences of others is necessary for representatives in determining what these perspectives and interests are. However, this raises the question: can we come to understand the experiences of others when we have not experienced them ourselves? In this section, I will argue that the category of transformational experiences presents a unique difficulty for those in representational roles because it hinders representatives from being able to accurately understand what it is like to be the people they are representing. If transformative experiences present an obstacle to being able to understand the perspectives of others, then transformative experiences will create a disconnect between the perspectives of representors and those they are representing. This

is a problem because the perceived interests of a represented person might vary wildly from what their needs are in actuality.

In L.A. Paul's book *Transformative Experience*, Paul outlines Transformative experiences as experiences that fundamentally alter a person's perceptions of the world or some aspect of their character (Paul, 17). Paul posits that there are two categories of transformative experiences: personally transformative experiences and epistemically transformative experiences. Personally transformative experiences are experiences that alter a core component of a person's views or preferences (Paul, 16). An example of this type of experience would be undergoing a religious conversion, an experience that has the power to affect the way in which a person perceives the world and can align their preferences with their religious doctrine. An epistemically transformative experience is an experience in which a person gains access to a new understanding of the world that they previously did not have access to. An example of an epistemically transformative experience would be a person losing their sense of sight. Without going blind it would be impossible to know what it is like to perceive the world in the same way a blind person perceives it.

Paul argues that there are phenomenal aspects of an experience, characteristics only observable from a first-person perspective, that a person who has not undergone the transformative experience cannot access. One of the most salient examples illustrating this point is the idea that a person cannot know what it is like to become a vampire

(Nagel, 439). Becoming a vampire would constitute both a personally and epistemically transformative experience. A person would gain access to new abilities and preferences such as immortality, enhanced senses, an aversion to sunshine, and an overwhelming fear of wooden stakes. However, it is impossible to know what it is like to be a vampire without becoming a vampire. Paul argues that although a person can try and imagine what it would be like to become a vampire, there is no way to ensure that this is an accurate representation of what the experience would be like (Paul, 6). Understanding the experiences of others is vital to being able to adopt their perspectives. Transformational experiences alter fundamental aspects of our character and preferences when we experience them. If we cannot understand what it is like to undergo those experiences without living them, then transformational experiences also create an epistemic barrier to understanding how others might change as a result of them. If there are phenomenological characteristics of a transformative experience that we cannot access without having lived it, then using our imaginative capacity to try to understand what it would be like to undergo that experience would seem to be the next best option. If someone were to tell us what a transformative experience was like and how it altered them, then we could try and use that information to try and recreate the phenomenological characteristics of the experience in our mind. This would allow us to access the relevant information needed to understand what it would be like to undergo a transformative experience. It would also give us the necessary insights into how they might affect the perspectives of the person who has undergone the experience. However, Paul argues that even the testimony of others about what their experiences are like is not useful for making a rational decision because every person is unique in their preferences

(Paul, 46). Even if we were able to accurately understand the transformative experience of another, along with how it has changed them, this information would not be generalizable to everyone who has undergone that transformative experience. The ways in which a transformative experience alters a person is individualized. This is specifically problematic in the case of those responsible for representing more than one person because even if they all share the same transformative experience, the ways in which that experience affected their perspective could vary amongst the group. Additionally, there is no way to ensure that our own imaginative reconstructions of another's experience is in any way accurate. Because we do not have direct access to the perspectives of others, there is no way to confirm that our understanding of someone else's experience is accurate.

If we take Paul's arguments as sound, the existence of transformative experiences poses a clear problem when applied to the context of representational roles. An argument for why the inaccessible nature of transformative experiences poses issues for the effectiveness of people in representational roles can be laid out as follows:

1. If Paul's theory of Transformative Experience is true, then we cannot understand the experiences of others. (Premise 1)
2. If someone is a qualified representative, then they understand the experiences of others. (Premise 2)
3. Paul's theory of Transformative Experience is true. (assumption)

4. Therefore, we cannot understand the experiences of others. (1,3 Modus Ponens)
5. Therefore, there can be no qualified representatives. (2,4 Modus Tollens)

Premise 2 is plausible because representatives must have a fairly accurate idea of a person's perspectives, values, and preferences if they are to accurately represent them. Without this knowledge one cannot be a qualified representative. It is possible that I could make decisions for others based on my own perspective that would be beneficial for the person I am representing. However, without understanding their experiences, I cannot really understand their perspective and how that might shape their needs. This would amount to nothing more than throwing something at the wall and hoping that it sticks. While my decision could potentially align with the perspective of the person I am representing, it also has the potential to wildly miss the mark. If we are to assume that a qualified representative has the ability to accurately make decisions that benefit their representee, then they must be able to bridge the gap between their own perspective and another's. The gap I am referring to is the potential differences that exist between people's individual perspectives. Everyone has undergone different experiences throughout their lives, so it is unlikely any two people would possess the exact same values, preferences, and perspectives. Because transformative experiences are driving forces in forming our individual perspectives, the representative must have some understanding of the transformative experiences that have shaped the perspective of another.

The danger that Premise II presents for people in representational roles is furthered by Wendy Salkin's "Judicial Representation: Speaking for Others from the Bench". Salkin questions what source of information can be employed by a representative to understand the values and interests of their target group. Salkin begins by examining a commonly held belief known as the "demand for similitude" (Salkin, 217). The demand for similitude is the idea that a representative should share common characteristics with the group that they are representing. Specifically, they should share the characteristics that are relevant to the issues at hand (Salkin, 217). The demand for similitude is another way of expressing that there is an experiential gap between individuals that must be overcome to serve as a qualified representative. Salkin argues that defenders of this viewpoint believe that first person experience is a fundamental component of understanding the relevant facts about people who are being represented (Salkin, 218). This argument stems from the idea that without sharing characteristics and experiences with the group being represented, one cannot effectively ascertain the perspectives, values, and interests of the group. Additionally, defenders of the demand for similitude would argue that other sources, such as testimonies and careful scrutiny from an observer, cannot provide the same degree of relevant information necessary to effectively carry out the task of judiciary representation (Salkin, 218). This demand for similitude closely mirrors the argument pulled from L.A. Paul in section I. The demand for similitude hinges on there being a phenomenological nature of being a member of a specific group that cannot be understood by an outsider to the group. Ultimately, the thing that makes the perspective of the group inaccessible to an outsider is the shared transformative experiences of the group.

Unless this demand for similitude is overcome, then a representative cannot be qualified for their job. Without understanding how experiences have shaped the perspective of another person, a representative would merely be subjecting that person to their will regardless of whether their perspectives are aligned. Therefore, it is vital that there is some ability to bridge the gap between the perspectives of the person doing the representing and the person who is being represented. If the representor can accurately assume the perspective of the representee then they have the capacity to infer what it is that the representee would desire for them to do. Given that the explicit job of people in representative roles is to consider the preferences of those they are representing, then a representative must be able to accurately adopt their perspective to be qualified for their role.

However, this is not as simple as merely attempting to understand what it would be like to walk a mile in their shoes. Given that every person undergoes transformative experiences throughout their life, it is only natural that the transformative experiences of those being represented are going to differ widely from the experiences belonging to those doing the representing. Attempting to understand the transformative experiences of those they are representing and the effects those experiences would have on their values, preferences, and beliefs would be incredibly difficult according to Paul's understanding of transformative experience. This is because there is an epistemic barrier that prevents us from being able to understand what it is like to be someone else. I could not understand what it is like to be a bat, I could only understand what it would be like if I were to

imagine myself as a bat (Nagel, 439). In the same way trying to understand what it is like to be someone else would be impossible, I could only imagine what it would be like for me to experience the transformative experiences that person has gone through in their life. While I can try to imagine what it is like to be someone else, I have no way of knowing if what I am imagining accurately reflects what it is like to be that person. For this reason, the concept of transformative experience poses a massive epistemic barrier to being able to accurately adopt someone else's perspective to make decisions on their behalf.

The makeup of the United States government is a perfect example of the potential divides created by transformational experiences between representatives and those they are entrusted to represent. According to the U.S House of Representatives Press Gallery, the median income for House and Senate delegates in the United States as of January 2015 was \$174,000 (House Press Gallery). These earnings for members of the House and Senate are over triple the annual wage of the average American (Stebbins). Additionally, members of the House and Senate often have alternative sources of income or come from wealthy backgrounds to begin with. This is evidenced by a 2018 report published by Russ Choma titled "Millionaires' Club: For First Time, Most Lawmakers are Worth \$1 Million-Plus". Choma reported that the median net worth for congress members in the U.S. was \$1,008,767 (Choma). Additionally, Duke public policy professor Nicholas Carnes found that "in 2012 and 2014, candidates from working-class jobs made up just 4% of both Republican and Democratic candidates" (Carnes). These statistics illustrate that most members of congress are not only wealthy but came from largely affluent



white-collar backgrounds. The working class only makes up a very small percentage of congressional candidates. Racial and ethnic minorities also make up only 23% of congress, whereas the other 77% is composed of non-Hispanic whites. This breakdown illustrates that congress is disproportionately composed of non-Hispanic whites as only 60% of the United States population falls under this category (Schaeffer). This figure is important because race deeply structures the lives of American citizens. For instance, surveys from the Pew Research center found that upwards of 80% of Black Americans feel that the legacy of slavery still impacts the position of Blacks in society. Additionally, more than half of Americans agree that being white is beneficial for success in America (Horowitz). These figures illustrate that race still plays a large role in structuring the lives of citizens. Because congress is overrepresented by whites in the ethnic majority, it is plausible that the racial disadvantages of other groups will be overlooked entirely. This is because the lived transformational experience of racial discrimination is likely something that they have never experienced. Without coming from these backgrounds, it is very plausible that congress members are limited in their ability to understand how coming from these backgrounds can create distinct disadvantages for others.

These statistics paint a clear picture of an elected congress that is mostly affluent and white. This group is responsible for important legislative decisions such as affordable housing, food assistance, and healthcare. Yet the composition of the United States congress differs wildly from the population of the United States whose interests these members of congress are tasked with representing. Whereas the majority of congress members are millionaires, 33.2 million people experienced poverty in the year 2020

(Shrider). Additionally, during the month of January 2020, there were 580,466 people experiencing homelessness in the United States (US Census Bureau). Despite only occupying 23% of congress, the United States as of 2021 was composed of 42.2% racial or ethnic minorities (Jensen). These figures illustrate the stark divide between the United States population and the members of congress that are elected to represent them. While much of the United States population has dealt with transformational experiences such as poverty, homelessness, and racial discrimination, these experiences have not been shared by most of the congress who pass legislation on their behalf. Even if these transformational experiences were not shared by the majority, it is still plausibly necessary that representatives have an understanding of these experiences. This is because these are the demographics of people who require the greatest degree of aid from their legislators. While most middle- and upper-class individuals will not be dramatically affected by domestic policy changes, it is often the poor, homeless, and ethnic minorities who experience a greater impact as a result of these policies. Even if congress members are elected by a majority who do not share these types of transformational experiences, they are still responsible for representing the interests of the minority. This would require some degree of understanding what it is like to be impoverished, homeless, or an ethnic minority. All of these cases are transformational in Paul's sense because they alter some aspects of who you are when you experience them. For instance, people who experience poverty might be inclined to value the idea of creating economic safety nets for people who fall on hard times because they understand that sometimes you never know where your next meal is going to come from. For people who have never experienced this degree of poverty this preference might not be shared. Because experiences are a driving

force behind preferences, values, and perspectives, these types of transformative experiences can create a substantial gap between the perspectives of congress members and citizens.

If congress is supposed to be representing the interests of these groups of people, then they need to understand what it is like to be the people that they are representing. If I were an affluent, white congress member, I might not know the different ways that racial discrimination could potentially affect my ability to get a job, receive adequate medical treatment, or influence the environmental factors of someone who comes from a less advantaged background. By understanding how these transformational experiences shape the lives, values, and perspectives of people from different backgrounds, these representatives can begin to understand what changes need to be made to provide proper aid. Without some understanding of the interests and desires of the citizens they represent, then it is likely that certain demographics will not have their needs met. However, Paul's arguments for the epistemological barriers to understanding the transformational experiences of others casts doubt on whether this is even possible. If effectiveness in representational roles is determined by the ability to adopt the perspectives of others to understand their interests, then transformational experience in principle presents a massive barrier to our ability to represent others interests effectively. In the case of congress, the expectation is that a mostly affluent white group of lawmakers will be able to understand what it is like to be Americans that have experienced the hardships of poverty, homelessness, racial inequality, etc. However, because of never having undergone these transformational experiences, the majority of

congress has never experienced the phenomenological characteristics of these hardships. Although they may try to empathize with or imagine themselves in these situations, it would be impossible for them to understand what it is like to have experienced these things for themselves. Yet most of these congress members can only imagine what it would be like if they were poor. They have never actually experienced what it is like to be truly disadvantaged. This can have major implications on important decisions surrounding healthcare, food assistance, and other aid programs vital to the well-being of people in poverty and homelessness. All of these programs would plausibly not carry the same importance for someone who has never had to rely upon them. Those who have needed these programs to survive are much more likely to understand how these programs can be vital to the wellbeing of the people who rely on them. This can affect the level of funding and priority they receive from government aid. These disconnects between people in representational roles and the people they are representing is a real danger when we consider the epistemic barriers of transformative experience.

## **Bridging the Epistemic Gap of Transformative Experience**

I will now argue that the innate imaginative abilities people possess can be utilized to narrow the epistemic gap in understanding the interests of others to effectively carry out representational duties. Although transformative experiences appear to be unique in their phenomenological nature to someone who has never experienced it, some might argue that it is possible to use our imaginative skill to create a greater understanding of what these experiences are like. If so, we can begin to build a greater understanding of what it is like to have undergone the experience ourselves. Given that transformative experiences directly alter our values and perspectives, understanding the transformative experiences of others would allow people in representational roles to gain a greater understanding of the people they represent. In this section I will argue that the process of imaginative scaffolding offers us an avenue to understanding the nature of the transformative experiences of others.

The implications of L.A. Paul's arguments for the epistemic inaccessibility of transformative experiences presents a clear challenge for people in representational roles. As argued in section one above, the implications of Paul's argument for the epistemic inaccessibility of transformative experience appears vital to being able to effectively perform one's duty as a representative. However, skilled imagination can be applied to the case of representative roles in order to bridge the experiential gap created by transformative experiences. Amy Kind's imagination argument provides valuable insights into how the experiential gap created by transformational experience can be

overcome by people in representational roles. In Amy Kind's "What Imagination teaches", Kind argues that imagination can help us access knowledge about transformative experiences. Kind focuses on our epistemic ability to access the phenomenal nature of transformative experience through imagination. Her argument begins by demonstrating that certain transformative experiences are accessible through imaginative reconstruction. Take for example, climbing Mount Everest (Kind, 9). Many people describe the experience as "life-changing", evidence that the person that they were prior to the journey is different from the person who has attempted to climb it (Kind, 9). People who have attempted the climb often talk about how the experience of climbing Everest is fundamentally different from every type of experience they have had prior. Most people who have climbed Mount Everest attest that the experience has fundamentally changed some aspect of who they are as a person due to the incredible difficulties that they faced along their journey. Because the experience of needing to summon the high degree of internal resolve and fortitude to climb the world's tallest mountain changed aspects of their character, this experience would qualify as transformative by Paul's definition.

However, Kind questions whether the phenomenal nature of this transformative experience is epistemically inaccessible through imagination. How is the experience of climbing Everest different from the experiences of someone who has had experience with other difficult hikes? There are several phenomenal characteristics that come with climbing Everest such as "mountain climbing experience, dangerous and strenuous

mountain climbing experience, [and] stretching oneself to the limit experience” (Kind 10). A person who has experienced other difficult hikes such as the John Muir trail or other mountain climbs is likely to have experienced all these phenomenal characteristics before. This challenges the claim from Paul’s transformational experience theory that the distinct phenomenal nature of the Mount Everest experience is fundamentally inaccessible to someone who has had similar experiences. Through imagination and previous experience, the experienced climber should be reasonably able to imagine what it would be like to Climb Everest and make a rational decision about whether they should choose to undergo this transformative experience. The experienced climber, if they had the requisite imaginative capacity, could piece together the relevant aspects of their other climbs to begin to understand what the experience would be like. This is because all of the distinct aspects that make Everest a transformative experience such as the elevation, the preparation, and the extreme adversity are all things that have been experienced by the climber before. Even if it were to a lesser degree, the climber has a basis of similar experiences that can be used to piece together what it is like to climb Everest. If they are able to understand what the transformative experience is like, then they have the relevant information to accurately predict how this experience might change who they are as a person. It would be as if they have experienced it for themselves in their mind, making it much easier to understand how the experience might affect their values, preferences, and perspective. Kind uses this example because it illustrates that not all transformative experiences seem to be as epistemically inaccessible to us as Paul argues they are. Although Paul does not use this specific example, it begins to illustrate that not all the

phenomenal characteristics of transformative experience are inaccessible through imaginative capacity.

From this example we can begin to question what types of experiences fall under the category of inaccessible through imagination. Even if imaginative scaffolding could be used by someone who has experience with mountain climbing to piece together the nature of what it is like to climb Mount Everest, it would be reasonable to question what other types of transformative experiences this technique could be applied to. Kind argues that the distinct phenomenal nature of different types of transformative experiences are not imaginatively closed off from one and other (Kind, 13). If someone possesses a skilled enough imagination, then there would be many types of transformative experiences that could be understood through the process of imaginative scaffolding (Kind, 15). Everyone has a wide variety of experiences that they have gone through over the course of their life, and a skilled imaginer could use these as a base to build up an accurate representation of what a transformative experience they have never undergone would be like. Some might be skeptical that this process could apply to a wide variety of transformative experiences. In the Mount Everest case, the skilled imaginer was someone who had experience climbing mountains. It would be reasonable to question whether or not someone could accurately represent a transformative experience that was drastically different from anything they had ever experienced before. However, Kind argues that this undersells the imaginative skill that some people possess. There are many people who are very skilled with imagining in ways that are incomprehensible to people who are less



skilled. There are examples of origami artists unfolding incredibly complex pieces of art entirely in their mind or Nikola Tesla creating and operating his machines purely through his imaginative capacity (Kind, 14). These examples demonstrate that skilled imaginers can create immense imaginative scaffolds with a great degree of accuracy. Nikola Tesla creating brand new electrical inventions from schematics in his own mind requires an incredible degree of skill and accuracy. Had his mental schematics even been slightly off, the machinery he created might not have worked at all. The same holds true of the origami artists, as they are capable of understanding every single fold necessary to create their art prior to actually attempting it. If they are even a few folds off in their imaginative reconstruction, then they would be incapable of achieving the incredible beauty and intricacy of their art. If people are capable of achieving these feats purely through imaginative skill and effort, then there seems to be few limitations to what can be represented through imaginative scaffolding. All of these things would likely be deemed impossible who did not have the skill or effort required to achieve similar feats of imagination. If we take someone with a skilled imagination it seems entirely plausible that they could begin to scaffold together transformative experiences that they have never experienced for themselves.

Like any other skill, imagining something as complex as climbing Mount Everest requires a tremendous amount of time and effort, something most people never attempt. However, if someone with a skilled imagination were to attempt to reconstruct this transformational experience by breaking it down to its smallest components and building

them on top of each other, it seems entirely plausible that they could accurately imagine the phenomenal nature of climbing Mount Everest. Even individuals unfamiliar with extreme mountain climbing have experiences with many of the unique phenomenal characteristics that climbing Mount Everest is composed of. Most people have undergone an experience that was tremendously physically difficult for them. In the case of a non-athlete this could be running a mile in school when they were a kid, whereas an athlete might have experience running a timed three mile. In either case, most people have experienced at some point a time where they had to push themselves to accomplish something physically strenuous. Additionally, most people have experience with planning something that took tremendous time and preparation, whether that be an academic presentation or a long camping trip. These experiences of physical stress and intensive planning are all components that make climbing Everest a transformative experience. Even if a person has experienced the component experiences to a lesser degree, they would have some understanding of the individual components that make up the transformative experience as a whole. In the case of a skilled imaginer, the process of imaginative scaffolding can help to bridge the gap between these prior experiences and the transformative experience of climbing Everest. They would be able to extrapolate from all of these previous experiences what it would be like to climb Everest because they can build an imaginative scaffold from all of their prior experiences. This would allow them to bridge the epistemic gap that Paul's transformative experience theory seems to create for understanding what it is like to undergo an unfamiliar transformative experience. Kind acknowledges the possibility that there may be cases in which there is too great of a gap between the phenomenal experience and our imaginative capacity for

this to be an effective method of understanding the “what it is like” of a transformative experience (Kind, 17). However, many of the transformative experiences that seemed previously inaccessible, such as climbing Mount Everest, can potentially be accessed through the process of imaginative scaffolding. If we can accurately imagine what a transformative experience will be like, then Paul’s argument that the phenomenological nature of transformative experience is inaccessible does not hold.

Kind’s argument provides an avenue for denying Premise III of the argument for why transformative experience presents a danger for effective representation. As laid out in section 1, Premise III is the assumption that Paul’s theory of Transformational Experience is true. Yet Kind’s arguments illustrate that this might not be the case. Using the technique of imaginative scaffolding, we can draw on the phenomenological aspects of experiences that we are familiar with to create a realistic imaginative understanding of what it is like to undergo that experience. Drawing back to the previous example in section 1, it seems feasible that a Congress member who is a millionaire from an affluent background can use this technique to come to understand what it is like to be someone living in poverty. Even if they have never experienced poverty themselves, they could use imaginative scaffolding to understand the transformational experience of living in poverty. There are many individual component experiences that make up the overarching transformative experience of poverty. One of these individual components could be experiencing what it is like to not have enough money to put food on the table for your family. This is one of the most difficult aspects of life for many who have experienced

poverty. If you are the provider for the family, you have to be constantly paying attention to how far you are able to stretch your money until your next pay day arrives. You might also have to deal with the disappointment of not being able to provide your family everything that they need because money is too tight. This can result in tremendous and difficult sacrifices being made in order to survive. For the average congress member, these are likely things they have never experienced as a result of their socioeconomic status and background. However, it is possible that they could draw on previous experiences to create an accurate imaginative reconstruction of what this transformative experience would be like. For instance, even the most affluent of people have found themselves in a position where they felt inadequate about being able to provide something for their loved ones. For some, that might be not being able to get into their parents' dream college for them because they did not have the test scores they needed. For others, that might be getting passed up for a promotion that would have enabled their family to have even greater financial flexibility or was of great personal importance to them. Even if these experiences are not exactly the same, there is at least a degree of interconnectedness between them. The experience of being incapable of providing something underlies both cases. Even if the extent of the distress that these experiences create is very different, the underlying nature of the experience is very similar. If the congress member had the imaginative skill, they would be able to extrapolate from these experiences what it would be like to not be able to put food on the table for their family with relative accuracy. Although that is only one of many components that makes up the transformative experience of being impoverished, the same process could be repeated for

all of the other relevant components. By doing this, a congress member could come to understand what it would be like to experience poverty.

Skilled imagination offers a viable avenue for at least bridging the gap of understanding between people who come from backgrounds of lived experiences very different from our own. Kind does acknowledge the possibility that there are some types of transformative experiences so fundamentally different from anything that one might have experienced that it might be impossible to grasp through sheer imaginative skill and effort. However, in the context of representational roles this does not pose a real issue. The cases that would be potentially impossible to grasp would need to revolve around experiences that one could not possibly possess the experiential background to build an imaginative scaffolding to reach. For instance, having some sense beyond the normal five senses that human beings would possess would be very difficult to build an imaginative scaffolding around. If you were a normal person who was limited to only having five senses, trying to imagine what a sixth sense would be like would prove incredibly difficult because you would likely have no background experiences on what it was like to acquire a new sense. This would present a real obstacle to the idea of using imaginative scaffolding to create an accurate construction of what the experience would be like. However, in the context of representational roles, the relevant experiences that the representative needs to understand do not fall under this category. To understand the transformational experiences that shape someone's perspectives and interests on a

particular issue does not necessarily require high degrees of abstraction. In the case of the affluent congress member, some of the transformative experiences they would need to understand are poverty, homelessness, and racial inequality. As demonstrated by the poverty example, these are not experiences that exceed the experiential basis of the vast majority of people. Due to the broad range of experiences that people go through over the course of their lives, most people have a background of experiences that can be applied to create an imaginative scaffold of these experiences. Things such as acquiring a new sense are much rarer, abstract cases that would not be relevant in the context of a representative being able to do their job. Because we can create imaginative scaffoldings that allow us to understand the transformative experiences of others, this process allows us to deny Premise III of the argument. It is clear that imaginative scaffolding provides a way to deny that Paul's theory of transformational experience is true in cases relevant to representational roles because we can understand what it is like to undergo unfamiliar transformative experiences.

## **The Requirements of being a Qualified Representative**

In this section, I will be arguing that we do not need to be able to entirely understand the perspectives of others to effectively represent their interests. Rather we need to meet a specific threshold of understanding of what it is like to be that person to effectively represent their interests. In many cases, this threshold is variable depending on the issues facing the people who are being represented. By determining that a holistic understanding of another's perspective is not necessary for representing their interests, we can deny Premise II of the argument to illustrate that the theory of Transformational Experience does not prevent people from being qualified representatives.

The argument that we do not need a holistic understanding of the perspectives of others to effectively speak on their behalf is supported by Wendy Salkin's "Judicial Representation: Speaking for Others from the Bench". Salkin delves into the question of what it takes to effectively speak on behalf of others by examining *Cleburne vs. Cleburne Living Center*. This was a case in which a judge, Justice Marshall, served as the judiciary representative for a group of 13 severely intellectually disabled men and women. Salkin defines judiciary representation in this case as "when, by virtue of what a judge says from the bench (for instance, in an opinion or during oral argument), they come to speak or act on behalf of the members of a group whose interests are at stake in a case." (Salkin, 211) In this case, Cleburne Living Center sought to build a hospital for the intellectually disabled but were denied zoning permits from the City Council of Cleburne, Texas

(Salkin, 213). During the subsequent legal proceedings, Justice Marshall became the voice of the severely mentally disabled individuals involved in the case.

While the specific details of this case are not pertinent to the scope of this paper, the ability of Justice Marshall to effectively voice the interests of the intellectually disabled is. This is because the severely intellectually disabled do not have the capacity to serve as members of the court. In order for these people to have their perspectives and values represented in court they will need to rely on those perspectives being given expression by someone who is not a member of the group. This becomes necessary when the group is incapable of representing their own perspective (Salkin, 212). This type of scenario perfectly illustrates the difficulties posed by transformative experience. There is a phenomenological nature to being severely intellectually disabled that is epistemically inaccessible to those who are not severely intellectually disabled themselves. Just as it would appear impossible to understand what it is truly like to be a bat, there are phenomenological characteristics of these individuals' lives that Justice Marshall cannot access (Nagel, 439). However, because these individuals do not have the capacity to represent themselves before the court, Justice Marshall must necessarily carry out this duty as a judiciary representative. For Justice Marshall to be considered a qualified representative for this group, he must be able to adopt the perspectives of the group to a degree in which he can provide an accurate reflection of their interests before the court.



I will argue that through understanding Salkin's criteria for effective representation we can begin to alleviate the myriad of problems created by transformative experience for representatives. Salkin argues that if the demand for similitude supporting Premise II holds, then we are led to a very unsatisfying conclusion in the context of judiciary representation (Salkin, 218). If the group is unable to speak for themselves by nature of their intellectual disabilities, then there is no one who could possibly represent their interests in court who is not an outsider to the group. This would be a highly unfortunate outcome as it would mean that there are groups of people whose perspectives can never be accurately expressed when others make decisions on their behalf. If these people are to be given a voice, then it must be the responsibility of someone outside of the group to take on the role of representative to make the group's interests known. Salkin argues that to overcome the demand for similitude we are necessarily limited to outside information sources including the testimony of people who are not members of the group, the formal representation provided by lawyers, independent research, or some other outside source (Salkin, 218). Without relying on these outside sources, we cannot possibly come to know what the interests and perspectives of the target group are. If we are to believe that there can be good judicial representation without shared first person experience, then there must be a threshold of knowledge about the target group that can be reached from other sources that is sufficient for effective representation.

Salkin's second argument offers a more satisfying conclusion as it rejects Premise II by illustrating that we do not need to know the entirety of a group's experiences to be

able to serve as a qualified representative. Rather, we only need to understand the experiences that have shaped the perspectives of the individuals in respect to the issue at hand. Salkin argues that the threshold of knowledge necessary to understand the perspective and interests of a specific group can be attained without shared first person experience from a representative. Salkin also argues that determining where this threshold of knowledge falls is highly contextual regarding the specifics of the group and their needs (Salkin, 219). To be a qualified representative one must have a strong understanding of the specific experiences that shape the represented groups perspectives in respect to the case (Salkin, 219). Any experiences that are beyond the scope of shaping the perspectives of the group in respect to the issue at hand is irrelevant to being able to perform the duties of a qualified representative. Salkin argues that in this case, Justice Marshall would need to demonstrate an understanding of the relevant features of the intellectually disabled group in the context of a housing dispute. For example, Justice Marshall would need to demonstrate an understanding of the history of discrimination faced by the intellectually disabled in a case concerned with Equal Protection Law. Additionally, he would need to recognize that there is a wide variance in the circumstances of the disabled individuals he is speaking on behalf of (Salkin, 219). Because shared first-person experience is not a potential option, Justice Marshall would need to be able to attain this relevant information to the case through other sources. Even if Justice Marshall is not able to attain an intimate understanding of what it is like to be severely intellectually disabled, he would need to demonstrate a strong understanding of the circumstances of the group that are relevant to the case.

It is very possible that information from outside sources can be used to understand what experiences have shaped the perspectives of the individuals in the group that are relevant to the case for the purpose of representation. In the case of Justice Marshall, he would first need to understand the history of discrimination faced by the intellectually disabled. This knowledge could be attained from a variety of different sources. It is highly likely that there are books and articles that can be used for the purpose of gaining understanding of the discrimination faced by these groups. Additionally, the testimony of people who have intellectually disabled relatives and loved ones or the testimony of the workers at the Cleburne Living Center could serve as adequate sources for gaining this information. He would also need to understand that not all of the needs of individuals that compose the group will be the same. Again, there are a variety of outside testimony that this information could be attained from such as printed resources or testimonies from others who have knowledge about the group. Any of the relevant features of the group's circumstances in regard to their housing needs could be attained in a similar manner. As long as Justice Marshall provides the requisite effort needed to acquire this information, there is no shortage of sources that he can turn to for learning about the experiences of the group that might shape their perspectives in respect to the case. This same process can be applied to any circumstance in which a representative would need to determine what experiences of the target group are relevant for representing their perspectives. Outside sources can be used to determine the experiences that the representative needs to understand to effectively represent others in the context of a specific issue. In the example of the affluent congress member, they would not need to understand the entirety of the experience of poverty in order to effectively represent people undergoing that

experience. Rather, they would need to understand the most relevant aspects of the experiences of poverty that have prevented them from being able to achieve financial stability. Whether this be drug use, systemic racism in zoning laws, or the inability to find work the representative needs to understand the experiences that keep people from getting out of poverty. They also need to understand what the greatest needs are for this group such as lacking food, lacking job opportunities, or lacking shelter. All of these factors could be determined through independent research and from speaking with people who are currently experiencing poverty. Because a representative can come to understand which of these experiences are relevant to representing the group on that issue from outside sources, then they would not need to understand the entirety of that group's perspectives and experiences.

Understanding what experiences of a representative group are necessary for representing them on a specific issue enables us to utilize imaginative scaffolding for effective representation. As outlined in section 2, imaginative scaffolding enables us to understand what it is like to undergo an unfamiliar transformative experience. By using outside sources, we can come to understand the threshold of information that is necessary for representing a group or individual, and then use imaginative scaffolding to come to understand what those relative experiences are like. Salkin's argument illustrates that representatives do not need to acquire a holistic understanding of the experiences that have shaped a person's perspective. Rather they need to understand what experiences that are relevant to the issue and from there imaginative scaffolding can be used to understand

what that experience is like and how it might shape their perspective in respect to the relevant issue. This is valuable because trying to understand what it is like to have undergone someone else's transformative experiences as a whole would be nearly impossible. There are far too many unfamiliar transformative experiences that have shaped a person's life to try and understand them all. However, by rejecting the demand for similitude and using other sources to attain information on the experiences relevant to the issue, a representative only needs to understand how a few experiences might alter a person's perspective. This is a far more feasible task for a representative. If we were to try to adopt a holistic understanding of a person's perspectives this has the potential to limit the value of our own perspective. Every person brings unique value in their own perspective as each person's individualized thought process has something to offer for solving problems when it comes to representational roles. However, there needs to be a balance struck between understanding the perspective of the people being represented and the representors own perspectives. This ensures that the represented group has their perspectives valued without sacrificing the perspective of the representor. This idea that we do not need to entirely understand the experiences of others refutes premise II by illustrating that there is value in understanding only the relevant experiences of a represented group rather than all of them. As long as the representor puts the requisite effort into finding out what those relevant experiences are through outside sources this can be attained.

I would argue from this example that the threshold of knowledge necessary for effective representation can be reached without having shared transformative experiences with the group or individual being represented. Although transformative experiences can prevent representatives from being able to completely adopt the perspective of the represented, the relevant knowledge of the group's values, circumstances, and interests can be attained through other sources such as testimonies, observation, and research. The degree to which the representatives need to understand the perspectives of the people they are representing will be variable based on the circumstances of the group. In *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center*, the primary issue was that the group of disabled individuals was experiencing discrimination against their rights to reside in the city of Cleburne given that they required an assisted living facility. There has been a long history of discrimination against those with intellectual disabilities, and this was not an isolated incident for members of this group. If Justice Marshall were to attain this relevant information, it would enable him to serve as a qualified representative for the group. In other cases, this threshold of knowledge could vary from based on the context of the specific issue at hand. However, Salkin's arguments illustrate that if a representative puts in the effort to understand the specific circumstances of the represented group, in spite of the barriers to understanding their perspectives created by transformative experience, then the knowledge threshold required to effectively do their job can be reached without first person experiences. Coupled with the use of imaginative scaffolding, a person could attain an understanding of the specific transformative experiences relevant to the issue at hand which would enable them to effectively adopt the relevant perspectives of the group for representation.

## Conclusion

In the first section of this thesis, I have used L.A. Paul's arguments to establish that the Theory of Transformational Experience poses a unique challenge for people in representational roles. According to the theory, transformational experiences create an epistemic gap that prevents people from being able to understand the transformational experiences of others. These experiences create a barrier of understanding that has the potential to limit our ability to adopt the perspectives of others. The demand for similitude also presents the worry that without sharing transformative experiences, this epistemic gap cannot be overcome. This prevents people from being able to serve as qualified representatives because they would not be able to access the perspectives of others which is a vital component of being able to effectively speak on their behalf.

However, in the second section I have used Amy Kind's arguments to deny the third premise of the argument that the theory of Transformational Experience is true. Kind's arguments help illustrate that transformational experiences do not create an insurmountable epistemic divide when it comes to trying to understand the transformational experiences of others. This is because the process of imaginative scaffolding allows us to overcome these epistemic barriers and create accurate reconstructions of what these experiences are like in our imagination. As long as a person has the requisite work ethic and skill to create these imaginative scaffolds, the understanding of unfamiliar transformational experiences needed to adopt the perspectives of others can be accessed. Additionally, I use Wendy Salkin's argument in

the third section to illustrate that the scope of transformational experiences needed to understand a person's perspectives is limited in the context of representational roles. An effective representative only needs to understand the experiences of the represented people in the context of what is relevant to the specific issue at hand. They do not need to gain a holistic understanding of what it is like to be that person. That would be an overwhelming and would limit the value of the representative's perspective. This enables us to deny premise II of the argument. Drawing on the arguments of Kind and Salkin, we are able to refute the conclusions that we cannot understand the experiences of others and therefore there cannot be effective representation.

While these arguments demonstrate that there are ways to overcome the epistemic barrier of transformational experience in adopting the perspective of others, transformational experiences still pose a problem for people in representative roles if they are unaware of the potential disconnects in understanding created by these experiences. In order to use imaginative scaffolding to overcome these barriers, it requires a person to make an investment of time and effort in order to make an accurate imaginative reconstruction of others' experiences. Similarly, in order to understand what experiences are relevant to an issue so that a person or persons can be effectively represented requires that the representative to invest the time and effort to determine what these relative experiences are. Both of these solutions to the epistemic barrier created by transformational experience require that the representative be aware that these experiential gaps exist and take the necessary steps to overcome them. If the



representative is not cognizant of these disconnects then it is unlikely that they will perform the necessary research and imaginative scaffolding to overcome these barriers.

In the case of an affluent congress member, it is plausible that they can come to understand the perspectives of people who have undergone wildly different transformative experiences from their own such as poverty, homelessness, and racial discrimination. By researching the relevant experiences of these groups in relation to legislative issues, and then using imaginative scaffolding to understand what these experiences are like the congress member would be able to bridge the epistemic gap created by transformational experiences in understanding their relevant perspectives. Even if they have never experienced these things themselves, a congress member could come to gain an understanding of the perspectives of the people experiencing them in relation to specific legislative issues. It is the congress members responsibility to make legislative decisions that can have dramatic impacts on these groups. To effectively provide representation it would therefore require them to gain these understandings. However, if the congress member is unaware of the epistemic barriers created by transformative experiences, it is unlikely that they would take these steps to provide effective representation for people of dramatically different backgrounds. This could result in making policy decisions that do not reflect the interests of these groups because their perspectives were never truly taken into consideration. From these arguments we reach the conclusion that although we have the capacity to overcome the epistemic barriers of transformative experience, refuting the argument drawn from Paul's theory of

Transformative Experience, it requires cognizance and commitment from representatives to provide effective representation for others.

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