

1 SYMPOSIUM

2  
3 **Experience, Transformation, and Imagination\***

4 Jennan Ismael<sup>(a)</sup>

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9  
10 **Abstract** I'm going to generalize the points that L.A. Paul makes in her *Transformative Experience* and  
11 push them in a somewhat different direction. I will begin by talking about transformative experience in a  
12 generic sense and say how ubiquitous it is. Then I'll distinguish that from the strict, specialized sense of  
13 transformative experience that Paul identifies. I will say why Paul's focus on the strict and specialized  
14 sense allows her to arrive at a strong conclusion, but bypasses the more interesting lessons which concern  
15 the importance of *de se* imagination and the possibilities for educating it.

16 KEYWORDS: Transformative Experience; Laurie A. Paul; Imagination; Decision

17  
18 **Riassunto** *Esperienza, trasformazione, immaginazione* – Intendo generalizzare le questioni sollevate da  
19 L.A. Paul nel suo *Transformative Experience*, spingendole in una direzione alquanto differente. Inizierò par-  
20 lando dell'esperienza trasformativa in senso generico, illustrando quanto questo sia diffuso. Quindi lo di-  
21 stingerò dal senso più ristretto, specifico dell'esperienza trasformativa identificato da Paul. Illustrerò le  
22 ragioni per cui la messa a fuoco di questo senso ristretto e specifico da parte di Paul le consente di giunge-  
23 re a conclusioni forti, evitando però i compiti più interessanti che riguardano l'importanza  
24 dell'immaginazione *de se* e le possibilità di educarla.

25 PAROLE CHIAVE: Esperienza trasformativa; Laurie A. Paul; Immaginazione; Decisione



28  
29 You live like this, sheltered, in a delicate world, and you be-  
30 lieve you are living. Then you read a book... or you take a  
31 trip... and you discover that you are not living, that you are  
32 hibernating. The symptoms of hibernating are easily detecta-  
33 ble: first, restlessness. The second symptom (when hibernating  
34 becomes dangerous and might degenerate into death): ab-  
35 sence of pleasure. That is all. It appears like an innocuous ill-  
36 ness. Monotony, boredom, death. Millions live like this (or die  
37 like this) without knowing it. They work in offices. They drive  
38 a car. They picnic with their families. They raise children. And  
39 then some shock treatment takes place, a person, a book, a  
40 song, and it awakens them and saves them from death.

41  
42 Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin*, Vol. 1: 1931-34

43 I'm delighted and honored for the opportuni-  
44 ty to write about remarkable book. It is close to  
45 the perfect philosophy book: tight, clean, clear,  
46 and it puts its finger on something that is worth  
47 thinking about from a number of perspectives. It  
48 raises questions of interest across the disciplines  
49 and central to human life.

50 I'm going to generalize the points that she  
51 makes and push them in a somewhat different  
52 direction. I will begin by talking about trans-  
53 formative experience in a generic sense and say

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<sup>(a)</sup> Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, 708 Philosophy Hall, 1150 Amsterdam Avenue –  
4971 New York 10027 USA

E-mail: [ji2266@columbia.edu](mailto:ji2266@columbia.edu) (✉)



54 how ubiquitous it is. Then I'll distinguish that<sup>02</sup>  
 55 from the strict, specialized sense of transform<sup>103</sup>  
 56 ative experience that Paul identifies. I will say<sup>04</sup>  
 57 why Paul's focus on the strict and specialized<sup>05</sup>  
 58 sense allows her to arrive at a strong conclu<sup>106</sup>  
 59 sion, but bypasses the more interesting lesson<sup>07</sup>  
 60 which concern the importance of *de se* imagi<sup>108</sup>  
 61 nation and the possibilities for educating it.<sup>09</sup>  
 62 Paul writes: 110

63 111  
 64 An epistemically transformative experience<sup>12</sup>  
 65 is an experience that teaches you something<sup>13</sup>  
 66 you could not have learned without having<sup>14</sup>  
 67 that kind of experience. Having that expe<sup>15</sup>  
 68 rience gives you new abilities to imagine,<sup>16</sup>  
 69 recognize, and cognitively model possible<sup>17</sup>  
 70 future experiences of that kind. A personal<sup>18</sup>  
 71 ly transformative experience changes you in<sup>19</sup>  
 72 some deep and personally fundamental<sup>20</sup>  
 73 way, for example, by changing your cor<sup>21</sup>  
 74 personal preferences or by changing the<sup>22</sup>  
 75 way you understand your desires and the<sup>23</sup>  
 76 kind of person you take yourself to be. A<sup>24</sup>  
 77 transformative experience, then, is an expe<sup>125</sup>  
 78 rience that is both epistemically and per<sup>126</sup>  
 79 sonally transformative. Transformative<sup>27</sup>  
 80 choices and transformative decisions are<sup>28</sup>  
 81 choices and decisions that centrally involv<sup>29</sup>  
 82 transformative experiences. [Personally<sup>30</sup>  
 83 Transformative Experiences] are those that<sup>31</sup>  
 84 lead you to change what you value and to<sup>32</sup>  
 85 what extent.<sup>1</sup> 133

86 134  
 87 She observes that when we see how epis<sup>135</sup>  
 88 temic and personal transformations work, it<sup>136</sup>  
 89 becomes apparent that many of life's biggest<sup>137</sup>  
 90 decisions can involve choices to have experi<sup>138</sup>  
 91 ences that teach us things we cannot first<sup>139</sup>  
 92 personally know about from any other source<sup>140</sup>  
 93 but the experience itself. She continues: 141

94 142  
 95 If the salient details of the nature of the<sup>143</sup>  
 96 transformative experience of producing<sup>144</sup>  
 97 and becoming cognitively and emotionally<sup>145</sup>  
 98 attached to your first child are epistemically<sup>146</sup>  
 99 inaccessible to you before you undergo the<sup>147</sup>  
 100 experience, then you cannot, from your<sup>148</sup>  
 101 first personal perspective, *forecast the first*<sup>149</sup>

*personal nature of the preference changes you may undergo, at least not in the relevant way. If so, the choice to have a child asks you to make a decision where you must choose between earlier and later selves at different times, with different sets of preferences, but where the earlier self lacks crucial information about the preferences and perspectives of the possible later selves, and thus cannot foresee, in the relevant first-personal sense, the self she is making herself into.<sup>2</sup>*

And she argues that this compromises the ability to make life choices in a manner that is both rational and authentic.

### ■ The ubiquity of Transformative Experience in a generic sense

Paul thinks that the ability to make choices at once rationally and authentically is compromised by the epistemic challenge of knowing what it is like to be that person in cases of transformative experience because the choice changes you in ways that are beyond your ken. Sometimes Paul speaks as though she is criticizing a particular conception of decision-theoretic rationality, and sometimes as though she accepts it as a characterization of what rational decision *should* look like, treating the epistemic problem presented by transformative experience as a lamentable difficulty with implementing it.

But anyone who has lived knows that uncertainty and the expectation of transformation are part and parcel of living a life for reasons that are entirely independent of the consider. Life is full of uncertainty of precisely the kind that means you can't control what experiences you have and how they will change you. Every single moment in your life is full of chance encounters that change your life in ways that you couldn't have anticipated in advance: The book you lift off the shelf while idly waiting for your mother in a grocery store at thirteen will change your world. You choose a job, paying attention to the weather and the

150 salary that will take you to a city where you<sup>98</sup>  
 151 find a new calling. Unexpected contingencies<sup>99</sup>  
 152 are part of the quotidian business of living and<sup>00</sup>  
 153 transform you in ways that couldn't be antici<sup>01</sup>  
 154 pated. You meet a man in a taxi in Chicago<sup>02</sup>  
 155 who later kisses you while explaining that he is<sup>03</sup>  
 156 moving to Australia. You kiss him back laugh<sup>04</sup>  
 157 ing, knowing you won't see him again. You<sup>05</sup>  
 158 ~~son will have his sense of humor,~~ and you<sup>06</sup>  
 159 twins will have his eyes. You follow a friend<sup>07</sup>  
 160 has Parkinson's to a yoga class to lend support<sup>08</sup>  
 161 five years into your dream job at the CIA and<sup>09</sup>  
 162 three months later you know you are bidding<sup>10</sup>  
 163 your time there until you can afford your own<sup>11</sup>  
 164 yoga studio. 212

165 If by transformative experience, one means<sup>13</sup>  
 166 "experiences that change you in ways that you<sup>14</sup>  
 167 can't predict in advance" transformative expe<sup>15</sup>  
 168 rience is the norm, not the exception. Your as<sup>16</sup>  
 169 sumptions about what you will like, who you<sup>17</sup>  
 170 will be, and what you will care about a year<sup>18</sup>  
 171 from now, <sup>19</sup>two years, <sup>20</sup>three, particularly when<sup>19</sup>  
 172 you are young, are hostage to things that you<sup>20</sup>  
 173 couldn't possibly know in advance and<sup>21</sup>  
 174 shouldn't be shy of embracing. The lion's share<sup>22</sup>  
 175 of uncertainty comes from the fact that the<sup>23</sup>  
 176 things that change us are the noisy contingen<sup>24</sup>  
 177 cies that come from outside our field of view<sup>25</sup>  
 178 when we are making a choice: the things that<sup>26</sup>  
 179 are selected, but not selected *for*.<sup>3</sup> If you look<sup>27</sup>  
 180 back at the truly transformative episodes in<sup>28</sup>  
 181 your life, I suspect that none of them (perhaps<sup>29</sup>  
 182 aside from having children) satisfied Paul's<sup>30</sup>  
 183 characterization of transformative experience<sup>31</sup>  
 184 If being rational in decision means an under<sup>32</sup>  
 185 standing in advance of who you will become as<sup>33</sup>  
 186 a result of choices you make, life is almost nev<sup>34</sup>  
 187 er rational. 235

188 ~~Nor do I~~ feel inclined to say that this is a<sup>36</sup>  
 189 lamentable fact we have to live with. It is hard<sup>37</sup>  
 190 to take seriously a model of rationality that<sup>38</sup>  
 191 says that we can't make a choice rationally if it<sup>39</sup>  
 192 will change us in ways that we can't know in<sup>40</sup>  
 193 advance. Living *should* be about transfor<sup>41</sup>  
 194 mation and genuine transformation involves<sup>42</sup>  
 195 uncertainty. 243

196 This isn't a new thought. Dan Russell, writ<sup>44</sup>  
 197 ing about what it is to aspire to virtue in an Ar<sup>45</sup>

istotelian sense, says something very like this.  
 He ~~says~~:

The choices that do most to enrich our lives are not choices of means to the ends we already know we have. They are rather ... the choices through which we come to discover new ends we might pursue ... we choose a career, or move to a new city, or meet a new person, not to become the persons we already knew we wanted to be, but to discover what persons we might become for having made those choices.<sup>4</sup>

I think he is exactly right here. Transformation according to plan is a shallow type of transformation, one that precludes evaluative learning. Paul says that there is no way of making a personally transformative choice authentically if you don't know in advance what you will become as a result. <sup>4</sup>Remaining open to transformation of all kinds at every stage isn't a *problem* for living authentically. It is what living authentically *is*. To enter a marriage or a new job in good faith is expecting and being willing to be transformed in ways you don't anticipate.

Paul says that there is no way of making a personally transformative choice authentically because she thinks that in order for it to be authentic, the choice has to flow from you. But that is not quite the right way to interpret authenticity, if she means it the way Sartre or de Beauvoir did. Authenticity for them meant your actions should flow from you *rather than* from misguided ideas about duty or the obligations that other people try to impose on ~~us~~, or by internal, self-undermining cancers like as appetite, addiction, or infatuation. It means that we should choose our lives *on our own terms*. Max Stirner used the word *Eigenheit* – "owning oneself" – which captures it quite well.

It *doesn't* mean that choices have to be rationally determined by a fixed character from which action flows. That idea goes radically against everything that Sartre thought about the human being. And the idea that it should be rationally determined by your current val-

ues doesn't strike me as too much of a far cry  
from that. At every moment, you create  
yourself, and the creation is radically free and  
radically new. The fact that your choices are  
*not* rationally determined by the values that  
you had in place in advance seems entirely in  
keeping with an existentialist conception of  
authenticity.

### The rarity of Transformative Experience on the Black-and-White Mary model

Suppose you agree that if "experience" just  
means the gestalt what-it's-like for a particular  
person in a particular situation at a particular  
time, transformative experience utterly ubiqui-  
tous. Everything that happens to you, and even  
simple reflection without any outward happen-  
ing, produces complex, holistic changes  
changes in values, preferences, utilities  
whose effects cannot be generally known in  
advance. The dynamics that governs those in-  
ner changes has all the hallmarks of complexi-  
ty: there are feedback loops, strong coupling  
among components, and non-linearity. The  
radicalness of the inner change is not in direct  
proportion to the novelty of the experience.

Some of Paul's discussion (particularly in  
connection with having a baby) suggests that  
this is what she has in mind. But in other plac-  
es, she is quite explicit that has something  
much more specific and esoteric in mind. The  
official definition of a Transformative Experi-  
ences is «an experience that teaches you some-  
thing you could not have learned without hav-  
ing that kind of experience». She gives other  
examples: tasting vegemite, becoming a vam-  
pire, choosing to have a retinal operation that  
will give you sight after living to adulthood as a  
blind person. These are supposed to be «struc-  
turally parallel to a version of Frank Jackson's  
case of Mary growing up in a black and white  
room». <sup>5</sup> What is characteristic of Transforma-  
tive Experiences as a class is that, in her words  
"you ~~also~~ can't know what it will be like to  
have the characterizing experience before you  
have it, and if you choose to have it, it will  
change you significantly and irreversibly." So

these are new types of experience that are epis-  
temically impenetrable in a particularly acute  
sense: you can't know what they are like with-  
out having them. And if we take the model of  
Black and White Mary seriously, having them  
resolves any epistemic uncertainty. Let's call  
this the Black-and-White-Mary model of  
Transformative Experience.

She focuses on these cases, I suspect, be-  
cause at least in the book, she seems primarily  
interested in the difficulty that the epistemic  
problem poses to rational decision. There is an  
interesting and well-developed discussion of  
the character of that epistemic difficulty in the  
literature on phenomenal consciousness that  
argues that the epistemic difficulty is absolute  
and insurmountable. So she can use the Black-  
and-White-Mary model of Transformative  
Experience to say that there is a deep and in-  
surmountable problem with making the most  
important choices that we make in our lives. It  
was a very interesting philosophical move to  
link those two literatures, and they make the  
structure of the problem very clear. But it leads  
her to look to decision rules like "seek new ex-  
periences" to resolve the decision dilemma.  
One might wonder why this should and she  
misses what is to my mind a much more inter-  
esting discussion.

By focusing on cases in which – by her  
lights – the epistemic difficulty is absolute and  
insurmountable, she suppresses any discussion  
the capacity to imagine what it would be like  
from a first-personal perspective to do things  
that you haven't done, to be in situations that  
you haven't been in, to understand how new  
experiences may change and shape you, to get  
a sense of what it would be like to walk in dif-  
ferent shoes not for a day or a week, but for a  
year or a life. Those are questions we face ev-  
ery day and few of them have the structure of a  
Black-and-White Mary example.

And that means she sidesteps what I think  
are the really important questions raised by  
her book. We are always making choices –  
big and small – that call on us to imagine  
what it would be like, from a first personal  
perspective, to do something we haven't

done. What would it be like to visit Sweden  
in February, or Costa Rica in the rainy sea-  
son? What would it be like to give a talk to a  
physics department or let our hair go grey? In  
high stakes cases, we need to understand  
what it would be to live a life different from  
our present life and the challenge is to try to  
imagine it from the inside. If I'm choosing  
between living in Tucson and living in New  
York, for example, or getting married or not  
getting married, the actual mechanics of  
thinking through ~~that~~ are very different from  
anything that is helpfully thought of on the  
model of tasting vegemite or becoming a  
vampire. It is not a total black box, and it  
doesn't seem to conform to the Black-and-  
White-Mary model.

### ■ The great grey area in between

The literature on Paul's book has tacitly rec-  
ognized this by moving away from the Black-  
and-White Mary model of transformative expe-  
rience to something more complex and subtle  
and with a much more interesting epistemology.  
So let me back up and say a couple of words  
about experience. The quality of your life in a  
sense that is directly phenomenological and  
matters most when ~~one has~~ a difficult life deci-  
sion to make doesn't depend on new types of  
experience of the sort involved in basic unstruc-  
tured qualia like tasting vegemite. It involves  
something with internal complexity, and emo-  
tional content, a much richer sense of qualita-  
tive character that captures the lived sense of  
what it is like to be someone other than who  
you are now. The case of having your first child  
is much closer to the sort of rich phenomeno-  
logical character I have in mind, but there too  
Paul emphasizes the insurmountability of the  
imaginative barrier because of the *physical*  
changes that come with becoming a mother  
which she thinks puts genuinely "knowing what  
it would be like" beyond the ken of someone  
who has not *had* the experience. She writes:

Having a child often results in the trans-  
formative experience of gestating, produc-

ing, and becoming attached to your own  
child. At least in the ordinary case, if you  
are a woman who has a child, you go  
through a distinctive and unique experience  
when growing, carrying and giving birth to  
the child, and in the process you form a  
particular, distinctive and unique attach-  
ment to the actual newborn you produce.<sup>6</sup>

Understanding Transformative Experience  
on the Black-and-White Mary model means  
that the ignorance is remediable only by hav-  
ing the experience. It is important for Paul's  
purposes ~~to do~~ so, because that is what allows  
her to say that there is an insurmountable epis-  
temic deficit that makes rational decision im-  
possible.

But when one widens one's notion of expe-  
rience to the rich phenomenology invoked  
above, it becomes clear that the phenomenon  
of not knowing what it will be like if you  
choose a certain path in life, is much more  
ubiquitous, much more a matter of degree,  
than these cases. And the wider class is not  
helpfully illuminated by ~~the~~ simple kinds of  
qualitatively new basic experiences like tasting  
vegemite, nor is it illuminated totally alien ex-  
periences like becoming a vampire. Once it is  
brought into focus, it becomes clear that the  
relationship between first-personal imagina-  
tion and experience is more complicated,  
equivocal, and interesting than the assimila-  
tion to Black-and-White Mary ~~cases~~ suggest.  
And it becomes clear that we are *always* having  
new experiences that change us in ways that  
are relevant to what our lives are like for us.

I'm not the first to say these kinds of thing  
in response to Paul's book,<sup>7</sup> and a lot of her  
own discussion of examples like having your  
first child invokes this much richer sense of  
knowing what it is like. But the official defini-  
tion of the class of *Transformative Experiences*  
(and the one that plays an important role in  
the discussion of decision theory) remains that  
they involve an epistemic deficit that can be  
overcome in no other way than by having the  
experience.

This matters a lot to the kinds of lessons

438 that one draws. If we are trying to capture 486  
 439 what actually what matters when one is try- 487  
 440 ing to imagine in a first personal way the in- 488  
 441 ternal quality of a life, we need something 489  
 442 that includes emotional phenomenology, pat- 490  
 443 terns of response, and the historically shaped 491  
 444 lenses through which one sees the world. 492  
 445 These color every aspect of the lived quality 493  
 446 of one's life. Experience in this rich sense has 494  
 447 cognitive depth (layers of content, built up 495  
 448 over time) and a profoundly path-dependent 496  
 449 character. When it comes to the rich sense of 497  
 450 knowing what it is like to be someone who 498  
 451 has had experiences different from your own, 499  
 452 the epistemic difficulty is there. But it is nei- 500  
 453 ther absolute, nor insurmountable, and over- 501  
 454 coming it is not (in practical terms) a matter 502  
 455 of having the experience but – at least in part 503  
 456 – of imagination. By focusing on the Black- 504  
 457 and White Mary model of transformative 505  
 458 experience, Paul passes over the philosophi- 506  
 459 cally important discussion, occurs in the more 507  
 460 vast and interesting area between inaccessi- 508  
 461 bility and ease of possession, where the imag- 509  
 462 ination works – and works hard – to attain 510  
 463 first-personal understanding. 511

### 464 ■ *De se* imagination 512

465 People use the word “imagination” in all 513  
 466 kinds of ways, and there is debate about what 514  
 467 imagination is, whether it is a form of 515  
 468 knowledge, whether there is a single thing, or a 516  
 469 family of things. I don't want to prejudge any 517  
 470 of those questions. I mean “imagination” here 518  
 471 in the specific sense of being able to imagin 519  
 472 from a first-person perspective what it is like 520  
 473 to be someone different than who you are now 521  
 474 What we are interested in is *de se* imagination 522  
 475 of a kind that involves imagining from a first 523  
 476 personal perspective being on the other side of 524  
 477 experiences than those you have had. 525

478 We all have an imagination fed by a certain 526  
 479 – inevitably restricted – diet of basic experi- 527  
 480 ence, and we have to form some idea of what it 528  
 481 would be like to be someone different from 529  
 482 ourselves. The ability to imagine what it is like 530  
 483 to be someone different from you, someone 531  
 484 532  
 485 533

who has been changed and shaped by experi-  
 ences of a kind that you have not had – is  
 important, moreover, well beyond its role in deci-  
 sion. It matters not just because we are faced  
 with choices about who to become. It matters  
 because we are faced with other people, who  
 have had experiences very different from ours,  
 and we are interested in who they are; what it  
 is like to be them; what it is like for them *from*  
*the inside*.

Imagination of the specific *de se* type in  
 question matters in human relationships of all  
 kinds. It matters for morality, for fairness, for  
 insight or comprehension. It deepens your un-  
 derstanding of the people around you and  
 makes you better able to be a good friend, a  
 generous helper, a wiser parent, a supportive  
 partner. This is obvious when you are dealing  
 with someone you love, but almost any social  
 exchange demands some form of it. To inter-  
 act with anyone as a human being, you need to  
 understand a little bit about what things are  
 like for him or her. This means not just know-  
 ing how the room looks from where they are  
 standing, but also knowing how the situation  
 seems to them in socially significant ways. You  
 need to appreciate something about where  
 they come from and who they are, because you  
 need to know whether they might be disadvan-  
 taged or vulnerable in the situation, whether  
 they might feel wronged, or grateful, or insult-  
 ed or rewarded by how you behave. This  
 chasm of (mis)-understanding was so painfully  
 on display recently in the hearing surrounding  
 the nomination of Brent Kavanaugh for the US  
 Supreme Court. The hearing, which was  
 broadcast nationally and seen by more than 20  
 million, included testimony from Christine  
 Blasey Ford who described an assault by a  
 drunken Kavanaugh 30 years earlier in which  
 he pinned her to a bed, tried to tear off her  
 clothes, and put his hand over her mouth to  
 muffle her cries for help.<sup>8</sup> It was clear that  
 women listening to her testimony understood  
 something that very few men seemed to appre-  
 ciate. Men seemed to think that even putting  
 aside any dispute about the facts, the assault  
 wasn't *that* a big deal. People drink. Things

534 get out of hand. She might have been scared<sup>82</sup>  
 535 but didn't get hurt. It was a couple of minutes<sup>83</sup>  
 536 when she was fifteen. Women understand that<sup>84</sup>  
 537 it was something altogether different: some-<sup>85</sup>  
 538 thing much more horrifying, something to do<sup>86</sup>  
 539 with powerlessness and a loss of innocence,<sup>87</sup>  
 540 something about being taught your place in the<sup>88</sup>  
 541 world that comes with its own peculiar mixture<sup>89</sup>  
 542 of rage and humiliation. Women understand<sup>90</sup>  
 543 why we keep these things secret. Men do not. 591

544 If one is trying to understand something 592  
 545 as complicated as the experience of being a 593  
 546 woman, or being a different race, the chal- 594  
 547 lenge is not just to imagine what it would be 595  
 548 like see something different in the mirror, or 596  
 549 even to produce social reactions different 597  
 550 from those you are accustomed to. The chal- 598  
 551 lenge is to imagine what it would be like to 599  
 552 have emotions and beliefs that were the 600  
 553 product of a history of experiences that are 601  
 554 shaped by being an immigrant, or — for ex- 602  
 555 ample — being a black person in America. 603  
 556 That goes back to the point about the path- 604  
 557 dependent character of the phenomenology. 605  
 558 A day outside the context of the life in which 606  
 559 it occurs is like a note outside the context of 607  
 560 the melody. It doesn't have the same quality. 608

### 561 ■ Educating the imagination 610

562  
 563  
 564 If there really were no way of knowing what<sup>12</sup>  
 565 it is like to be someone different from you, ex-<sup>13</sup>  
 566 cept to go through the experiences they've had,<sup>14</sup>  
 567 things would be rather dire. But of course, it's<sup>15</sup>  
 568 not like that. The imagination can be educat-<sup>16</sup>  
 569 ed, and the circle of experience can be wid-<sup>17</sup>  
 570 ened, in ways that don't just depend on having<sup>18</sup>  
 571 the experience oneself. None of us is in fact<sup>19</sup>  
 572 confined to our own experience. 620

573 When you go through things with the peo-<sup>21</sup>  
 574 ple you are close to — e.g., when you liv-<sup>22</sup>  
 575 through the illness of a friend with cancer, or<sup>23</sup>  
 576 you live through the aging of parents — you liv-<sup>24</sup>  
 577 through it not just from your perspective, but<sup>25</sup>  
 578 also from theirs. Books can also play an im-<sup>26</sup>  
 579 portant role. The English novel, perhaps more<sup>27</sup>  
 580 than any other artistic form, allows one to take<sup>28</sup>  
 581 a deep dive into the lived experience of another<sup>29</sup>

er human being from the inside. This can give  
 you psychological insight, not just into other  
 people, but also into yourself. It can make you  
 better at recognizing your own emotions and  
 articulating them to others. It can also open up  
 the imagination to ways of being far outside  
 the range of one's experience. Why do we  
 think that people in a bad situation (immig-  
 grants, refugees) always want their children to  
 get a good education? They see it as their tick-  
 et out, not just because they think it will help  
 them get a good job, but it will help them see a  
 life beyond their situation, recognize opportu-  
 nities, create a life for themselves different  
 from the experience of their parents. They  
 know something that those of us who have  
 started treating universities as professional  
 training have forgotten: viz., that a strong and  
 healthy imagination, nourished by a rich array  
 of real and imagined people and worlds, is the  
 best thing that you can equip your child with.

There is a huge variety of ways in which  
 people educate the imagination, of course:  
 travel, novels, seeking out not just new friends,  
 but new types of friends. This kind of educa-  
 tion is never finished and there is no single way  
 to achieve it. Nor is it *easy* to *really* know what  
 things are like for people different from your-  
 self. One of the things that you learn in life is  
 that your assumptions about the inner lives of  
 others are often way off. Many people you  
 think have it easy do not. Many people who  
 seem to be gliding right along have suffered  
 and are suffering. People who you knew when  
 they were young and hip, and who now appear  
 to be old and sad — saddled down with kids  
 and cars and houses — are happier than they  
 have ever been.

As hard as it is to get right, the need to exer-  
 cise *de se* imagination is unavoidable. The better  
 you get at it, the better decisions you will make  
 for yourself and the better equipped you will be  
 to understand other people. The pop psycholo-  
 gy catch word for this kind of thing is emotional  
 intelligence. It is indifferent to whether it is self-  
 or other- directed.<sup>9</sup> ~~Or perhaps that it will give  
 people who want to be good a better idea of  
 what being good amounts to.~~

I've never understood why the imagination – this specific type of imagination; imagining what it is like to be a person with a different history of experience – is not more central in discussions of moral psychology.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

In sum, then, I think the book is fascinating, but Paul's focus on the Black-and-White-Mary model of transformative experience was unfortunate. It made the central argument analytically clearer, but at the expense of steering past a deeply important philosophical discussion which is sitting right beside the questions she raises. The need to educate and to strengthen the imagination – in the specific sense of being able to imagine what it is like to be someone different from who you are now, someone shaped by experiences that you have not had – is important in ways that go well beyond helping you know whether you'd be happy in this life rather than that one.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Précis of Transformative Experience*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. XCI, n. 3, 2015, pp. 760-765, here p. 761.

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, p. 765 – emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> That is not to say you don't have some control, but the idea that you control your life in a way that is at least suggested by the picture of decision-theoretic rationality – where you have beliefs about the world, you imagine what different futures are like, and choose the one with the highest expected utility – is completely unrealistic. Lots of things will happen to you that you didn't choose, and it is hard to know what you will become. The hours reading poetry, the failures and the small humiliations, the people that hated you, you don't know why, and the unexpected peace you find when you are in a desert. These things are your becoming. It will all add up to something, but you can't possibly know what.

<sup>4</sup> D. RUSSELL, *Virtuously Aspiring to Virtue*, manuscript.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Jackson introduced a Black and White Mary, of course, in F. JACKSON, *Epiphenomenal*

*Qualia*, in: «Philosophical Quarterly», vol. XXXII, n. 127, 1982, pp. 127-136. See also, F. JACKSON, *What Mary Didn't Know*, in: «The Journal of Philosophy», vol. LXXXIII, n. 5, 1986, pp. 291-295. The argument involves a thought experiment that is almost universally regarded as establishing that there are certain kinds of knowledge – viz., knowledge of phenomenal properties – that can only be gained through experience. Mary is a fictional neuroscientist who «for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like “red”, “blue”, and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wavelength combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces via the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal cords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence “The sky is blue”» (F. JACKSON, *Epiphenomenal Qualia*, cit., p. 127). The claim is that she will learn something new – viz., what blue looks like – when sees blue for the first time.

<sup>6</sup> L.A. PAUL, *Précis of Transformative Experience*, cit., p. 764.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, R. CHANG, *Transformative Choices*, in: «Res Philosophica», vol. XCII, n. 2, 2015, pp. 237-282; E. BARNES, *What You Can Expect When You Don't Want to be Expecting*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. XCI, n. 3, 2015, pp. 775-786; J. CAMPBELL, *L.A. Paul's “Transformative Experience”*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. XCI, n. 3, 2015, pp. 787-793.

<sup>8</sup> Kavanaugh denied the allegations. The disagreement I'm pointing to is not a disagreement about what happened, but a disagreement about how much it mattered.

<sup>9</sup> The claim is nothing as simple as that reading will make bad people good. It is that it will good people better at *being* good. It can also make bad ones better at being bad. If *de se* imagination can make you more sensitive, more attuned to the difference and complexity, better at recognizing what is going on in someone else, it can also make you a better manipulator, a cannier liar, and an all-around knave. What makes Iago *bad* is his malign intentions. What makes him *dangerous* is his



psychological insight. But the link between morality and de se imagination is more complex than this suggests. Our failures to be good are often failures of the imagination in a way that makes us culpable. Part of what we owe others is to *recognize* their perspective, and that imposes the responsibility to try to understand it.

<sup>10</sup> The call to move morality away from rationality and towards imagination is one that Iris Murdoch made long ago. She used the word “perception” rather than imagination to emphasize that it can give rise to real knowledge. She writes «I would suggest that, at the level of serious common sense and of an ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals, it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge; not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and ex-

sult not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certain and perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline» (I. MURDOCH, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Penguin, New York 1993, p. 330). The famous example she gives involves exercise of moral imagination. It involves a mother who begins with an unsympathetic and self-serving view of her son’s fiancé, seeing the young woman as undignified and uncouth, not worthy of her son’s affection. By forcing herself to look at the girl not through the lenses of her own social values and disappointed expectations, but through other lenses (those not organized around self-centered concerns, but framed – as Murdoch might put it – by love) she opens herself up to seeing the girl’s freshness and spontaneity and undergoes a transformation of vision that ends by recognizing her simplicity and goodness (I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge, London/New York 1970).

ploration of what confronts one, which is the re-