

I am philosopher L.A. Paul, working on transformative experience, rationality and authenticity. AMA.

LAPaulAMA ¹ and r/Science AMAs¹

¹Affiliation not available

April 17, 2023

Abstract

I'll return at 11AM to answer questions live! I'm a philosopher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Professorial Fellow of the Arche Research Centre at the University of St Andrews, whose main interests are in metaphysics, phenomenology, and cognitive science. If you want to know more about me, here's my website, an interview about my research interests with 3am magazine, and an interview with more personal sorts of questions at NewAPPS. Much of my recent work focuses on the nature of experience and its role in constructing the self. I'm especially interested in exploring the way that some experiences can be transformative. Transformative experiences are momentous, life-changing experiences that shape who we are and what we care about. Going to war, winning the lottery, having a baby, losing your faith, or being spiritually reborn are all experiences that transform us epistemically, and through the epistemic transformations they bring, such experiences change us personally. Massive epistemic change can restructure who you are and what you care about. When you have a transformative experience, something new is revealed to you—what's like to be in that situation or what it's like to have that experience. Once you discover this, you discover how you'll respond, and in particular, who you'll become as the result of the transformation. In this sense, an exploration of transformative experience is also an exploration of the self, since we are exploring the way that experience allows us to discover who we are and what we care about. We discover new features of reality through experience, and this discovery turns us back into a new understanding of our own selves. I prefer to work on these philosophical questions using somewhat technical and formal tools from contemporary philosophy drawn from metaphysics, epistemology, decision theory, and the philosophy of mind. I'm also interested in empirical work in cognitive science, statistics, and psychology, and I try to bring relevant empirical research to bear on my conceptual work. I see myself as a defender of the importance of phenomenology and lived experience, but within a context that emphasizes the use of formal tools and empirically informed research combined with analytical metaphysics to frame and tackle philosophical problems. I've done a lot of work in the past on the nature of time and the metaphysics of causation and counterfactuals, and that work also informs the project of transformative experience in some obvious and some not-so-obvious ways. Recent Links: There have been a number of good discussions in the media of transformative experience. Here are a few, and there are more links on my website. In the New Yorker, Joshua Rothman discusses impossible decisions and the transformative experience of seeing color for the first time In the Wall Street Journal, Alison Gopnik discusses my original argument about the transformative nature of becoming a parent here In The New York Times, David Brooks discusses my book The Philosopher's Zone has a fun podcast about transformative experience here Transformative Experience (OUP 2014), now available 30% off with promocode AAFLYG6 I'll return at 11AM to answer questions live! Thanks for the questions, everyone. I'll look in later, but I need to go back to work now!

[REDDIT](#)

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LAPAULAMA [R/SCIENCE](#)

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[READ REVIEWS](#)

Hello Dr. Paul,

[WRITE A REVIEW](#)

Thank you for taking the time to do this AMA!

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I am a graduate student in bioethics (and soon to be medical student) with an interest in end-of-life care and advance care planning specifically. I was introduced to your work on transformative experience as an undergraduate, and just recently it has struck me how relevant this topic is to advance care planning and how much this problematizes some approaches to it (e.g. go through a list and check what you would and wouldn't want done in the case of a serious illness). I haven't had time to seriously delve into this yet, but I would like to in future.

To me, serious illness definitely seems to be a particular sort of transformative experience, and my feeling is this would render advance care planning morally dubious in many cases since it seems to involve both elements of both epistemic and personal transformation since serious illness changes you both as a knower and as an individual in a way you cannot practically predict beforehand. In short, how do you see your work as relevant to advance decision making in the case of serious illness and advance care planning? Do you think advance care planning is a productive enterprise? If you've done any work on this topic that I've overlooked please let me know. I'd be thrilled to read it.

Thanks!

[AgnosticKierkegaard](#)

Excellent point, you are absolutely right about the connections here. I am *extremely* interested in cases that involve advance directives, and a new book I am working on discusses some of these types of cases explicitly. For example, I take cognitive decline to be transformative, and I am very interested in how a self at t1 can make decisions for a self at t2, when that self at t1 cannot know in the relevant respects what that self at t2 will care about most. I introduce some of these issues in the Afterword of my book, when I discuss informed consent, but there is much more to say here, and I hope that I and others will be able to do more work on this question.

Speaking on transformative experiences, what is your opinion on psychedelics?

[asf4](#)

I think taking psychedelic drugs could indeed be transformative. For example, there is interesting new research on how taking psilocybin (mushrooms) can have a transformative effect on how terminally ill patients represent their impending deaths.

I would have thought every experience is "transformative". Either it changes and alters you in some way (like a war experience) or it galvanizes and maintains the course you're on (often war experiences do this too).

Even walking out of your house each day and seeing the grass of your lawn is still green is strengthening your commitment to the messy inductive processes that our brains put us through which allow us to succeed each day.

I guess I'm asking - why isn't every experience "transformative" in some sense? Or does "transformation" for you have to be some kind of rejection of a past view?

[TheQuietMan](#)

So, why isn't every experience a TE? A reasonable question! As I define it, whether or not an experience T is transformative for an individual is a contextual matter: it depends on what background experiences and capacities that the individual has before she has the experience T. The relevance of the experience for decision-making, as a novel experience, depends on how the outcomes or states of the decision model are partitioned or divided up. (For more, please see pages 36-38, chapter two of

TE, for discussion of partitioning experiences in transformative decision-making, or just look at lots of other standard work in decision theory about this issue.)

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[TheQuietMan](#)

Also note that an experience is transformative in my sense when it is both epistemically *and* personally transformative. Sometimes an epistemic change is so dramatic that it scales up into a personal transformation, and so counts as a TE in my sense. Sometimes the epistemic change causes a personal transformation, and this also counts as a TE in my sense. Sometimes the connection is both causal and constitutive.

Thanks for having this AMA!

What's the best example of a transformative experience that has impacted on you? (whether personal or a case study)

Thanks for reading!

[MOzGA](#)

Having my first child, going to graduate school to study philosophy.

Hello! Thanks for doing this AMA, I don't have a specific question that I've been dying to ask a philosopher, but I am curious about a your view on the use of psychedelic drugs in order to reflect upon and review your life experiences.

For some background, I have gone through some of the experiences you mention in your bio and some others that have definitely transformed me: I lost a parent at the age of 17 (currently 22), I lost my faith around 19, I'm about to graduate from an engineering university, I've had my heart broken, and traveled the world quite a bit for someone of my age.

I use LSD and mushrooms (in healthy moderation, and only began about a year ago) in order to look at my life from a different angle and decide what is important. I often find that I am focusing on the wrong things.

Do you think that this is healthy for people with healthy minds? What other methods would you suggest for lucid reflection and finding new angles to view past problems?

[a_bongos](#)

It sounds like you are doing a lot of cool stuff. Perhaps write about your thoughts and experiences, and explore more art and literature? (I am a fan of the work of Jorge Luis Borges, for example.)

Hi Professor Paul, great to have you here!

A couple quick questions. I haven't had a chance to read your book (although I did listen to the [New Books Network interview](#) which was super helpful) so they may be easy to answer.

1. Have you thought about experiences at all which transform an agent so drastically that they're simply no longer an agent? I'm imagining a sci-fi scenario in which we could choose to become content pigs or something of the sort. Certainly our values would change (or disappear, if you don't want to maintain that non-rational agents have values), so it seems personally transformative (although oddly probably not epistemically transformative!). Do you have anything to say about these cases?
2. One outcome of the book is that the decision to have children is, at best, probably non-rational (and possibly irrational, if your arguments don't succeed). I'm curious whether you think this has any moral implications. You're not saying this, but I can imagine an anti-natalist co-opting your arguments as more evidence in favour of anti-natalism. Take Benatar for example: if being born harms the child, and further that harm isn't outweighed by some good done to the parents, then it looks like he may be able to strengthen his case.
3. Are there any common examples which people often take to be transformative experiences when they are first introduced to the concept (of either sort) which actually *aren't* on your account?

[A Definite Description](#)

1. Interesting issue. I think of these as cases where personal identity changes—but you are right that TE-like questions arise here which have not been explored.
2. There are a lot of potentially ethical questions that arise here. For example, consent questions with regard to medical treatment of disabled people. How to think of the choice to abort along with the choice of whether to become a parent. Questions about how to think of the choice a 14 year old might make to keep her baby. I don't have anything definitive to say here—fertile territory though. In chapter three I talk about some of these issues in regard to cochlear implants, and in the Afterword of my book I discuss informed consent issues.
3. Sometimes people don't realize that I take "transformative experience" to apply to cases that are both epistemically and personally transformative. (I discuss this in the written work, but not everyone has to read that!) An experience that transforms what I know to some (small?) degree might be merely epistemically transformative but isn't transformative in the significant sense in which I want to use the term. An experience that changes me in some totally predicted way might be personally transformative but isn't epistemically revelatory in the way that I want it to be for the sorts of transformative experiences I'm exploring.

Does the self play an active role in response to a transformative experience, in that the phenomenological character of the experience itself can be altered depending on how the events are integrated within the self?

Suppose I have a near death experience. What factors are involved in my response being an affirmation of life ("I have to live it while I can!") versus an assertion of the futility of life ("What's the point of living anyway")?

[mendicantbias69](#)

The nature of your response will be affected by your own psychology, as well as by structural features of your environment. Some people seem to be resilient, and respond to adversity more positively. Others have more difficulty.

The vampire example in your book's introduction reminded me of something I've thought about since I was a teenager: the case of mutually incompatible preferences over time.

T1: A person undergoes a transformative experience, e.g. becoming a vampire, joining a cult, regularly using psychedelics or other drugs, and so on. It's not particularly important whether this transformation was fully intentional, incidental, or completely involuntary as long as the person ultimately prefers the new state. As you wrote regarding vampires,

They say things like: "I'd never go back, even if I could. Life has meaning and a sense of purpose now that it never had when I was human. I understand Reality in a way I just couldn't before. It's amazing. But I can't really explain it to you, a mere human—you have to be a vampire to know what it's like."

T2: The person is reverted against their will to their former state, whether due to the intervention of others or not. For example, maybe the vampire is bitten by an eripmav or their body naturally rejects the vampirism, the cultist is kidnapped and deprogrammed or accidentally oversleeps on the day that everyone else drinks the Kool-Aid, and the drug user is arrested and forced to go to rehab or just loses their dealer's phone number. The essential element is that when all is said and done, the person *also prefers* this reversion to their former state. They might say,

"Boy, I'm sure glad I'm not in that vampiric drug cult anymore! I don't know what I was thinking."

Since I haven't actually asked a question yet, here goes: When would it be ethical to attempt to transform someone against their wishes? (Or: When do others know what's best for a person?) Hardcore libertarians might argue that e.g. deprogramming cultists is unethical because they freely chose to join the cult and currently prefer to remain a member, which raises the question of how free that choice was in the first place. Another perspective might be to argue that certain transformations (i.e. [u/ADefiniteDescription's](#) content pig) remove a person's agency and subsequent right to remain in that state.

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And on the topic of mutual incompatibility, how would your proposed solution,

to choose based on whether we want to discover who we'll become

address the existentialist complaint that there are a multitude of paths in life and choosing one forecloses all others? For example becoming a parent and an astronaut are both surely transformative, but it may not be possible to do both (well).

At first glance it seems as simple as saying "Well, Alice is curious about being an astronaut, Barb is curious about having a baby, and Carol isn't curious about either, so they should act accordingly." But this just leads to questions like: "Why are they curious about some things and not others?" and "What *should* they be curious about?"

It's appropriate that you mentioned leaps of faith in your article about becoming a parent, since it brings to mind Kierkegaard's cheerful summation of philosophy,

Marry, and you will regret it; don't marry, you will also regret it; marry or don't marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the world's foolishness, you will regret it; weep over it, you will regret that too; laugh at the world's foolishness or weep over it, you will regret both. ... Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, and you will regret that too; hang yourself or don't hang yourself, you'll regret it either way; whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret both. This, gentlemen, is the essence of all philosophy.

In light of psychological studies on hedonic adaptation, e.g. by the Daniels Kahneman and Gilbert, it's

probably more accurate to say "you will be fairly happy either way" (except for the "hang yourself" option), but the dilemma remains.

TL;DR: 1) When is it ethical to transform or re-transform a person against their currently stated wishes?, and 2) How does the "choose based on curiosity" advice deal with many-valued life choices rather than yes/no ones?

[aHorseSplashes](#)

All good points. I don't have good answers. But here's a try. (1) I don't know when it is ethical to transform someone against their wishes--if that person is a rational agent, perhaps never. (Though if the lives of others are at stake, this question is incredibly fraught.) (2) In these many-valued cases of life choices, if there is no overriding moral/legal/testimonial reason to choose one over the other, then I see it as a coin flip. So I'm more or less with Kierkegaard on how there isn't a real choice here, though like Kahneman and Gilbert I tend to be a bit more optimistic about things. (No regrets!)

Hi Dr. Paul! No question here, but I took your course "The Experience and Reality of Time" in undergrad and it was by far one of the most interesting and well-taught courses I had the pleasure of taking - it was a transformative experience! I was so excited to see you on here, and I hope I can pick up a copy of your book soon.

[ReasonAndNumbers](#)

Thank you! I'm very glad you enjoyed the course. It always makes me happy to have contact with former students.

Hi, as you mentioned, losing faith or experiencing the traumatic effects of war can be a transformative experience and reveal new characteristics of ourselves, but those might not be experiences we wanted or things we wanted to know about ourselves. Does the person ultimately try to come to a sort of homeostasis, in the sense of having had a bad experience, a person ultimately seeks a better one, or are we doomed to carry that knowledge throughout time? How much of your work deals with cognitive dissonance, and how much of a role does that play in our everyday experience?

Thanks

[modenpwning](#)

I discuss, in places, how a big part of responding to transformative experiences involves responding to them or coming to terms with who we've become. In a new book I'm working on, I discuss these issues in more detail. Some questions about cognitive dissonance and understanding self-change in experimental social science contexts are also discussed in this paper: <http://www.lapaul.org/papers/t-treat.pdf>

Thanks so much for doing this. I'm curious about your take on a pretty basic philosophical question.

What makes you you? Are you you're your epistemic content (thoughts, feelings, beliefs) or simply your subjective awareness? If you were somehow physically duplicated and your duplicate had all the same epistemic content, would they be you? Would they be you *to* you? If not, that makes it seem like you are simply *this* awareness and not your epistemic content. Yet, if you were to physically undergo the most radical transformation of all and somehow be physically transformed into an entirely different person (say John Malkovich) at midnight tonight, would you still be you at 12:01? It doesn't seem like you are either just your subjective awareness or your epistemic content alone. According to you, what

makes you you?

[archetech](#)

Good question. I tend to think of your first personal perspective as defining your lived experience, and this is a defining feature of what makes you psychologically you. That is, it is an essential part of your psychological self. Is there, in addition, a haecceitistic or distinctive "thisness" feature of my lived experience that makes me, me? I don't know!

Hello! Just a general question, would you recommend a pursuit of a PHD in philosophy? A lot of my old professors told me it's not worth it unless you come from a wealthy background. With the odds stacked against aspiring philosophers, what route or option would you recommend we take?

[Katn](#)

Tough call. If you get into a good research PhD program, you will likely have a career in philosophy. (If not, it's still possible, but I'd think twice.) It's important to like teaching though.

The real question; did you watch the Tar Heels take home the championship on Monday?

[haberlet](#)

Go Heels! <https://twitter.com/justinbeisner/status/849116853263888385>

Would you rather fight one hundred duck-sized horses, or one horse-sized duck?

[kijhealy](#)

One hundred horse-sized ducks, obviously!!

Do you have any thoughts on what people interested in transformative experience can glean from the history of philosophy?

[voltimand](#)

There are a lot of structural parallels between individuals undergoing TEs and the kind of conceptual revolutions we see with scientific and other intellectual and cultural changes. So--many interesting issues and analogies here, at least!

In your view, what is a good definition of human consciousness?

[SpaceElevatorOrBust](#)

I don't have one, unfortunately. But I am most interested in experience.

What books would you recommend for a beginner in this subject?

[IvanMIT](#)

Anything by the philosopher Thomas Nagel.

Have you done any research on the transformative experience of a person coming out (straight to gay) or vice-versa (gay to straight)? If so, what have you found?

[WaywardSon26](#)

I have not, although I think of this as a good case. Rachel McKinnon has written about transitioning genders as an example of a TE, "Trans*formative Experiences", available here:

<http://cofc.academia.edu/RachelMcKinnon>

As a college bound high school senior interested in philosophy, how practical is it to make a living off of this passion? I'm going to major in psychology because the mind is intriguing to me and seems like a more viable employment option.

[Rusefrost](#)

Do philosophy as an undergrad major, and you'll be well-prepared for all sorts of careers. Cognitive science and psychology courses are good things to take as well, and learn how to code if you want a good job.

I see myself as a defender of the importance of phenomenology and lived experience, but within a context that emphasizes the use of formal tools and empirically informed research combined with analytical metaphysics to frame and tackle philosophical problems.

What's your opinion on the 'consciousness' debate over the last 40 years or so, and its relation to phenomenology/subjective lived experience as an object or method of philosophical enquiry in contemporary philosophy? I ask because as an interested outsider it seems to me that vapid arguments about "consciousness" have been the most public aspect of academic philosophy in this time, which has been damaging both to the perception of philosophy in other disciplines and to more interesting work in phenomenology (such as your research). I'm totally in the Dennett/Churchland camp and it seems to me that Searle and Chalmers' arguments, and lots of linguistic faffing about in analytic philosophy of mind have been a total waste of time and energy.

[mawkywormbent](#)

I think a lot of interesting and important work has been done in the debate over consciousness, but I would like to see more attention paid to other topics as well. There are so many fascinating issues involving phenomenal knowledge and understanding/phenomenology that philosophy of mind could contribute to. (I agree that the debate over consciousness has sometimes put people off the philosophy a bit, but I think there is a movement to improve this situation. David Chalmers has a cool new book on virtual reality in the works, for example.)

I would really, really like to see "analytic" philosophy of mind engage more with lived experience in particular, and not worry quite so much about physicalism.

What's the most powerful transformative experience you have seen so far? Did it drastically affect more than just the individual involved?

[ImpatientPhoenix](#)

A very powerful one I hear about a lot is the experience of fighting in a war, of being injured or of killing another person. I haven't experienced this myself. Another big one is religious transformation, either gaining or losing faith.

Does serious drug use (heroin, say) count as a transformative experience? Surely something that so dramatically changes how you make decisions, what you pursue, and how you rank experiences in terms of enjoyment counts as a transformative experience.

[topiary_bird](#)

Yes. I'm not saying it's a good transformative experience, mind you, but it is one.

I'd like to say thank you for taking the time to do this AMA. I am a junior year philosophy student and I find these are useful in clarifying my own thoughts, positions, and potential misunderstandings in philosophy. This being said, I have a couple of questions.

I. How does your work differ from John Locke's ideas of personal identity?

(Source: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)

II. You mention authenticity above and this makes me think of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. If it stands that a self has the capacity to change through experience, can there ever be an 'authentic' self? If so, what does that look like or how is that determined?

III. David Hume rejects that we have a self and refers to our notions of identity as a "bundle of impressions". Can you provide a counterargument against the idea of not having a self?

(Source: *A Treatise of Human Nature*)

(This gives a better outline: <http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil1020/Hume4.pdf>)

A lot of these questions I probably should've (and could've) expanded upon, but I would be typing for an hour or two trying to pull quotations from my studies. I appreciate any response or corrections to the above questions.

[ThePhillyosopher](#)

1. I am interested in a metaphysical characterization of the psychological self, as opposed to personal identity. 2.(Sartre Q). I am more positive about the possibility of there being an existing, authentic self. However, authenticity might consist largely in recognizing that discovery and experience construct who I am. 3. (Hume Q). I take Hume to be rejecting the idea of the self as a substance. A Humean about the self could take the self to be the bundle of impressions or properties. I find that sort of view congenial.

This topic fascinates me and I am so glad there are people like you who study it at advanced levels. I don't frequent the philosophy sub but this AMA has really captured my attention. I will be exploring the links you provided.

I think of myself as someone who has had a number of significant transformative experiences for my age (twenties): losing my faith, being a psychiatric inpatient, a divorce, a victim of sexual assault, to name a few.

I mentally divide my life into before-and-afters; especially in regards to the psychiatric hospitalization. What's interesting to me is that I cling to these experiences. Traumatic as they were, they have given

me my greatest values: resilience and authenticity.

What allows me to cherish these terrible life events is that through them, I have found myself. I have found myself and learned to value and rely on myself.

Is this a common theme of transformative experiences? Are there any common themes or lessons in transformative experiences, or are they unique to each individual?

Bonus question: do you find that there is an expiration date to the transformative effects, or do they continue to build until the next pivotal event?

Thank you for introducing me to your research. This is a topic I will investigate with interest.

[anonymousavalanche](#)

Everything you say about this rings true to me as an authentic response to the transformative facts that structure our lives. Different people face different kinds of TEs, but understanding how they affect our lives and who we become is for me one of the most interesting philosophical lessons. You might be interested in reading my new book, "Who will I Become?" when it is published next year.

What is the purpose of life, from your own philosophical experience and personal views about life?

[amazing_spyman](#)

I don't know if there is a purpose. In my book, I argue that sometimes life is more about discovery (and I'd also add, about loving and caring for others) than anything else.

In your words, what is philosophy?

[GEEZUS_956](#)

Thinking carefully and deeply.

What are your thoughts on the enlightening experiences Indians have been talking about since thousands of years?

It has been described as the most transformative experience ever. In experiencing super consciousness, you come out a changed personality.

The qualities of wisdom, love, blissfulness and peace radiate from you.

It's like hitting puberty. It was always within you, you just didn't know that a human body is capable of such an experience. And it can be verified, again and again and again.

By yourself and by other people, the experience is that exact same no matter who.

What do you think on these thoughts? :)

Thanks :)

[yay_raj](#)

There seem to be deep connections between transformative experience and Buddhist philosophy. Evan Thompson, a philosopher at UBC (Vancouver), has been working on these issues.

Dr. Paul: What if your transformative experience is your earliest memory? I understand rationally that I once existed in a state of bliss and self-worth, but I have no memory of what that experience felt like.

[MultipleEeyoregasms](#)

That seems possible.

Hi Paul,

Could a pet be considered an extension of the owner?

Can we relate a seeing-eye-dog that loses some of its eyesight and thus affecting the owner to that of a person losing some of their own eyesight?

[subanark](#)

Interesting idea--I think we could. The same goes for anyone to whom we have a close or intimate relationship: changes in them could create a TE in us.

Hi Professor Lori Paul..Not really a question but just hope you'd see this. I met you once at Princeton as an undergrad attending a gender minority in philosophy conference. We discussed your work on transformative experiences and it has inspired me ever since, even though I did not end up pursuing philosophy. I am now a PhD student in clinical psychology and I still believe the lesson in transformative experience applies to my current field. Even as clinicians or professionals, we shouldn't overestimate the scope of our empathy and believe we know more than we did. I'm trying to be more patient and empathetic everyday in studying psychopathology. Thank you Dr. Paul, you're truly an inspiration for women in academia!

[angery_bork](#)

Thank you! This made my day.

What are your thoughts on the idea of everything is on a path that has already been set and there is no true free will?

[ElShepherd](#)

I recommend Peter van Inwagen's work on this question.

Do you think everything happens for a reason?

[star-cha](#)

no.

Hi professor, i would like to ask you: Which Greek philosophers had inspiration on your work?

[Lykos290](#)

I find Aristotle's work especially inspirational!

At what age do you feel is the earliest a transformative experience can take place? Do you think something which happens before one's mind is capable of remembering it (i.e. maybe 18mos old) can be sort of a subconscious transformative experience for the rest of one's life?

As for TEs, I totally get what you're saying. Losing 250lbs in 10 months through diet/exercise has totally changed everything, physically and especially psychologically. I'm finding out that early-life events have/are affecting me more than ever.

[dante437](#)

I don't know when the earliest TE could take place, but you are absolutely right that babies and children often develop through TEs: they add and develop concepts at many different stages of life, even very early. Paul Bloom and Christina Starmans (Yale Psychology) have been doing some very interesting research on just this issue.

Curious about your thoughts on two things: a) Self directed transformational practices vs transformation from "accidental" experiences. Meditation, prayer, yoga, or physical exercise seem quite different from getting hit by a bus or getting lost at sea. b) Why phenomenology needs defenders.

[CB200](#)

Self-directed TEs are the sorts of things we use to try to construct ourselves, and accidental TEs are things we often have to respond to (and in the process, also construct ourselves). Both kinds are important. Phenomenology has been underexplored in contemporary "analytic" metaphysics and epistemology, and I am working to change that.

How much of your philosophy comes from Jean-Luc Marion and what do you think the similarities and differences are between his saturated phenomenon and your transformative experience?

Edit: Why has every question been addressed except for mine?

[Invius6](#)

sorry, I addressed a similar question below--my work does not connect with this thinker but I will explore the ideas.

What are your thoughts on Jungian individuation? How do they relate to your idea of transformative experience?

[PM-me-ur-trains](#)

I have not explored this area.

I have a question which I hope I am able to phrase properly.

What can be said about how an individual's state of mind or more specifically their level of consciousness could affect an experience?

Would you say that multiple levels of consciousness could be explored to discover an experiential quality of life?

[rod2020](#)

Yes. I think attention, and perhaps learning to focus and control one's attention the way we can with meditation or other sorts of training, could be used for this sort of discovery.

What happens when the gamut of your interests passes through the lense of nonviolence, assuming this is a robust, developed sense of nonviolence?

[ravia](#)

Do you mean to say that becoming nonviolent is a kind of TE? this seems possible.

[deleted]

[\[deleted\]](#)

It sounds like the case you have in mind is one where the person finds being depressed transformative (not in a good way), and then is transformed back to their old self.

Has Brooke sold your book short?

To quote his review,

"People who have a child suddenly become different. Joining the military is another transformational experience. So are marrying, changing careers, immigrating, switching religions."

These are not single experiences but a transition from one community to another. Sociology explains how and why our behavior changes within a new community or social structure.

What other take does your book offer?

[sinsimbad](#)

My book develops the questions using the framework of analytic decision theory. Sociologists investigate these life changes, but they don't apply the philosophical theories I develop to understand them. (That said, new collaborative research is starting to do this.) For a paper on how the philosophy of transformative experience affects the interpretation of social science, have a look at this paper:

<http://www.lapaul.org/papers/t-treat.pdf>

How do you differentiate original thought and influenced thinking? Meaning in order to developed the self into its truest form (if that exists) then where do we draw the line between what we are predisposed to think and feel, rather than what our innate sense of self tends to think or feel?

[goldei](#)

Each person's response to a situation is the result of a mix of innate or inner features, plus structural or external factors. It may not be possible to determine how much is inner and how much is external.

As you would intend it, what distinguishes the psychological self from the personal self?

[trippingbilly0304](#)

I take the psychological self to be composed largely of conscious experience. A person, however, is constructed from much more, including a physical body that might be more than a brain, and a chain of psychological selves.

Hi Dr. Paul, thank you for doing an AMA, your introduction alone has already piqued my interest to look into your work.

My question is in regards to how we might (or if we can) intentionally induce transformative experiences in an attempt to change our identity.

For context, I have a purely academic interest in occultism, especially its history and semantics. One particular idea that caught my attention in recent months is that of Chaos Magick, which attempts to use transcendental experience, meditation, drugs, and other avenues to self-induce beliefs that are seen by the practitioner as useful. The methods and theory around it, as with most occult material, seem like utter hogwash, but the idea that we might be able to actively induce transformative experiences to positively change ourselves seems sound.

Belief doesn't, classically, seem like the kind of thing we can "choose" to do, viz. arguments against Pascal's Wager, but perhaps it *is* something we could induce via the proper avenues. What are your thoughts on the viability of using transformative experiences as a tool to mold one's identity?

[oth_radar](#)

I think that transformative experiences definitely mold identities, and that we can try to use our TEs to do this--but I also suspect that we have very little control over how things will turn out. I agree that many TEs just happen, they aren't chosen, and that this is relevant for things like religious transformation (so I agree about the Pascal wager issue).

Lived experience has always been important and relevant to me in forming opinions and subjective facts, yet in contemporary science and society this dimension is usually ignored, denigrated, or otherwise devalued. The best explanation I've found of this is the work of Ken Wilbur who describes the blindness of the exterior objective forms of knowledge to the interior subjective. In my opinion, the future of humanity and progress will involve a gradual realization and integration of the subjective realms with the objective.

Could you talk about this subject and how transformative internal experiences produce and inform objective knowledge?

Thank you!

[me3peeoh](#)

My thought is that knowledge arises from a combination of the internal and the external, from processing information that we received and assess through contact with the external world.

Hey Ms. Paul, thanks for doing an AMA! Here's a mostly nonsense question coming from a young student with no knowledge of philosophy: Our perception of the world is based in things we learned when we were very young. At some point in our early development, perception overrides sense and we

begin to know the world around us by instinct. Therefore, we never truly see the world through critical adult eyes. Do you think there's a kind of transformative experience that can yank us out of this trance and allow us to relearn the world on more complex terms?

[Scdsco](#)

I would say that all through childhood and adolescence we are gaining new concepts, and that this process is transformative.

Do you teach, and are your classes online? I recently graduated from a philosophy master and (re)started work, and I miss classes so much :(

[retorquere](#)

I teach classes in Chapel Hill at UNC.

Has researching transformative experiences been a transformative experience for you? If so, how?

[unbeardedphilosopher](#)

Yes. Through this research I've begun a series of collaborations with psychologists and cognitive scientists, and have learned a huge amount from them while developing ideas. I've also had a ton of fascinating discussions with philosophers and non philosophers like economists and lawyers about this material, and this has also changed my relationship to my work and to the field.

Whoa I'm supposed to go to your lecture for my class tomorrow and now I'm super excited!

[TheApiary](#)

See you tomorrow!

Thanks for the AMA. As many answers as you're interested in giving please hope it's not too many questions

1. Have you read Yuval Noah Hariri's Sapiens? If so what did you think?
2. What questions would you like explored more thoroughly by the scientific establishment?
3. How do you think the human quest for self actualization will change in a technologically advanced society of the future?
4. What are fundamental differences observed between spiritual people and materialist people?

[flamingolion](#)

I'd like there to be more connections between science and philosophy. As for your #3, one of my areas of research is the notion of a self as realized by an artificial intelligence, and the human quest will surely be affected by science's focus on AI. In addition, technology change can bring about TEs all the time: think about life before the iPhone. Finally, things like climate change can also bring about TEs.

How would you say your TE Philosophy compares (if any comparison exists) to Event phenomenology as expressed by Jean-Luc Marion or Claude Romano? Reading Romano's *Event and Time* for class was my first exposure to philosophy of temporal experience so I'm very interested in your work as it seems to have many overlapping ideas.

[vi11alobos](#)

I don't have views about this--these thinkers work in a different tradition from mine. But I will explore these ideas, thank you.

Is the transformative experience related to a person discovering their own path, apart from the collective?

[matt2001](#)

Yes, it involves individuals constructing themselves and understanding how they have to choose their own path, often bucking the system.

Hello Dr. Paul:

I ask you does it annoy you when internet people ask the fundamental question over and over again, "Is religion logical." Wouldn't you, based on what you wrote, assert that is not as valid a question as, "is religion transformative." Don't you agree these people are looking from a transformative experience from this repeated question but it would be better for them to explore the question by living a life or getting a life.

[Antics1981](#)

I think experience is as important as theoretical analysis here.

What is your understanding of authenticity? I ask as there are multiple approaches, from existential to contemporary, everyday approaches. I would like to know how you understand the complex construct.

[ungov](#)

Authenticity involves being true to yourself: understanding what your abilities and desires are, and acting consistently with them.