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Enoch Lambert and John Schwenkler, eds., BECOMING SOMEONE NEW: ESSAYS ON TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE, CHOICE, AND CHANGE

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perfect correspondence between God's thoughts and the structure of the abstract realm. Both are explained by what is intelligible, which is in turn explained by God.

Abstractionists, we conclude, whether of the dependent or independent variety, need not fear Ward's arguments.

We end on a positive note. This is a good read. It is, throughout, clear and concise. But its virtues are more than mechanical; the book is human and blessed with more than a few moments of beautiful prose. Ward blends analytic argument and attention to detail with literary allusion and devotional relevance. If you want to think more about the mind of the Maker, this is a fine place to start.

Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change, edited by Enoch Lambert and John Schwenkler. Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 304. \$80.00 (hardcover).

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Transformative experiences are experiences that are both *epistemically transformative* (only the experience itself gives one "what it's like" knowledge of the experience) and *personally transformative* (the experience has the potential to change one's defining agential features, such as core preferences, life goals, and way of seeing the world). Since L.A. Paul's ground-breaking *Transformative Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting" (*Res Philosophica* 92, 2 (2015): 1–23), the conversation surrounding transformative experiences has spawned a sizable literature.

Lambert and Schwenkler's *Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change* adds to this growing literature. Over the span of an introduction and fifteen essays, this collection introduces readers to what transformative experience is and some of the classic questions raised by Paul's work. It also expands the conversation by including several chapters that survey relevant empirical work in psychology, as well as chapters that cover diverse topics such as artistic expression, punishment, and dying. This review starts off by offering an overview of some of the themes found in the collection. It then closes by offering some "critical" thoughts that are perhaps more positive and exploratory than critical.



1. Overview

Lambert and Schwenkler's introduction and Paul's chapter open the collection by offering a wonderful introduction to transformative experience. In addition to explaining and motivating what they are, both chapters lay out the stakes of choosing to undergo such experiences—especially with respect to becoming someone new. Those well-versed in the literature won't find anything ground-breaking here. However, these chapters serve as excellent presentations of the dialectic and have value as introductions (for those new to the literature) and recaps (for those who could use a quick reminder).

We'll briefly discuss the two most central themes in the literature that they address, since these themes set the stage for the remaining chapters. The first centers upon epistemic transformation, one of the components of transformative experience. Paul claims that prior to having a transformative experience, we cannot know what the experience is like. Having the experience provides us with a special "what it's like" knowledge that cannot be transmitted in any other way. Furthermore, without having this knowledge, we cannot assign subjective values to potential outcomes involving transformative experience, which creates a problem for standard decision-making procedure. Obviously, this claim about subjective value is controversial and "assimilation strategies" are a popular response strategy. In essence, assimilation strategies incorporate methods for dealing with uncertainty given by decision theory. For instance, one might assign values based on the experiences of others. Paul resists this strategy, saying that it is "alienating" and "inauthentic."

Several of the chapters engage with this epistemic theme. The two contributions by Arpaly and Kind take up focus on whether imagination is a reliable tool that enables us to know what a (transformative) experience is like before having it. While both are skeptical of special experiential, "what it's like" knowledge, they differ on whether imagination can fill in the gaps. As the titles of their chapters—"What Is It Like to Have a Crappy Imagination?" and "What Imagination Teaches"—suggest, Arpaly colorfully explains that our imagination is mostly "crappy" and often fails to figure out what experiences are like while Kind more optimistically suggests that through "imaginative scaffolding," our imagination is good enough to teach us some things about what some experiences are like.

Of course, even if one shares Kind's optimism about our imaginative abilities, there are bound to be cases where we do run into epistemic walls and are unable to project what an experience will be like. Here, we confront the decision-making aspect of epistemic transformation: if we can't assign subjective values to potential outcomes because we don't know what they will be like until we have the experience, how are we to implement standard decision-making procedure? Balog suggests that an answer may lie in the subjective/objective distinction (in the Nagelian

sense). Pettigrew, a proponent of the so-called “assimilation strategy,” also takes up this issue. In his chapter, he tackles a friendly suggestion offered by Moss on behalf of Paul that revolves around probabilistic knowledge. (For anyone familiar with Moss’s work, this chapter by Pettigrew is a must read.)

The second theme centers upon personal transformation—the other component of transformative experience. Personal transformation involves changes to a person’s central agential features, such as their core preferences, life goals, and way of seeing the world. Paul, as well as Ullman-Margalit, endorses a “replacement model” on which transformative experience results in a “new self” which replaces the “old self.” Of course, the replacement model invites many questions. For instance, we might wonder what kind of changes revamp a person’s entire perspective or whether there are any psychological mechanisms underlying these changes. We might also wonder whether the replacement model is even metaphysically coherent.

While the contributions engaging with the epistemic transformation operate within a well-developed literature, the contributions focused on personal transformation break newer ground. Glazier takes up the metaphysical possibility of “becoming a new person”: how is it that, e.g., *I* could become someone distinct—i.e., not identical—to myself? He offers an innovative defense of the coherence of *contingentism*, roughly, the view that *I*—or you, or anyone—could be someone else. The metaphysical possibility of becoming someone new through transformative experience follows from this defense.

Even if we accept that Glazier’s account (or something like it) works and that there is a way to make metaphysical sense of the “replacement model” of personal transformation, we might wonder what this looks like in practice. Are there psychological mechanisms that can help us make sense of how it is that one undergoes personal transformation? It is here that the chapters incorporating empirical work in psychology shine and truly make this collection stand out. Malouki et al. present a series of experiments that reveal that people’s views about what is central to their selves vary in semi-regular ways. For instance, most regard their moral features and personality as most central, though perception of degree of change varies based on factors like valence, desirability, and expectations. Zimmerman et al. attempt to model how people in fact respond to “transformative options” and view tradeoffs between intelligence and happiness.

The remaining chapters in the collection are best described as building upon the literature. Callard, Riggle, and Cashman and Cushman propose that personal transformations take place in many ways. For Callard, transformation comes through engaging in transformative activities, while for Riggle it comes through expression in art. (Callard’s chapter is an especially enjoyable read.) Personal transformations also take place through moral failure. Cashman and Cushman explore the ways that moral failure

interacts with our emotions and motivations. Interestingly, since we often transform and learn through moral failure, this presents challenges in moral training since we presumably do not want our teaching methods to involve the promotion of moral failure.

Schwenkler and Lackey's articles explore some ethical implications of transformative experience, especially with respect to epistemic norms. Schwenkler explores the doxastic transformation and the extent to which we ought to guard ourselves against evidence that might change our central beliefs. Lackey argues that our practices regarding punishment ought to be sensitive to relevant future evidence, which includes the fact that people can—and often do!—transform in radical ways. These transformations are relevant to whether it is permissible to uphold long-term punishment.

Interestingly, Lackey's chapter (along with the aforementioned Cashman and Cushman one) looks at potential transformative experiences from a third-person perspective. While other discussions of third-person perspectives on transformation revolve primarily upon making potentially transformative decisions *on behalf of* another person (such as deciding whether to give your young child a cochlear implant), these chapters force us to consider how we ought to act *given that* other persons are likely to transform at some point in their lives. Here, Terlazzo's chapter on adaptive preference and transformative experience also advances the conversation since it forces us to consider the social and political implications of creating circumstances in which people are likely to transform people.

Lastly, a chapter on death by Thompson offers a "meta" view on transformation, both for those who experience dying and those who witness it. As an "ultimate transformation," death gives us a meta-perspective on our life as a whole, which in turn affects which experiences we take to have been transformative after all.

2. Critical Thoughts

Reviewing this collection with a critical eye is not an easy task. While there certainly are nits to pick with individual essays, the collection as a whole presents a nicely varied look at transformative experience that covers quite a bit of ground. However, one might be left wondering for whom this collection is intended. A newcomer to the literature would be better served reading Paul's "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting" and the immediately surrounding literature. For instance, those interested in assimilation strategies and replacement models are better served reading the 2015 *Res Philosophica* special issue on transformative experiences (which includes the aforementioned Paul article) and Ullmann-Margalit's seminal "Big Decisions: Opting, Converting, Drifting." For longer book-length treatments, Paul's *Transformative Experience* and Richard Pettigrew's *Choosing for Changing Selves* (Oxford University Press, 2020) might

also be better choices for newcomers. At the other end of the spectrum, those familiar with the literature may end up finding the majority of the essays too basic or too niche.

Nevertheless, a third group of people may find value in this collection. Though they may not occur frequently, big decisions and radical personal transformations are ubiquitous in the sense that nearly everyone undergoes them at some point in their lives and that they can occur in very different parts of people's lives (e.g., the familial, religious, or political parts of their lives). This ubiquity, combined with the fact that the literature is fairly new, means that the literature has room to expand. Those looking for inspiration for their own projects might benefit from the breadth of this collection. In fact, it is here that philosophers of religion and readers of this journal ought to pay notice. While none of the chapters (perhaps other than Schwenkler's) directly address religion, there are many natural connections between transformative experience and philosophy of religion. We highlight two potentially fruitful connections here and invite readers to continue exploring them further.

First, politics and religion are tightly interwoven these days, particularly in American society. Malouki et al. note the role that social roles can play in one's self-conception:

Recent research finds that people who perceive that a social category (e.g., Democrat or Republican) is causally central in their self-concept are more likely to act in ways that are consistent with that aspect of their identity. . . . Understanding the causal structure of a person's identity may thus provide unique insight into their likely identity-consistent future behavior. (67–68)

One can't help but think that, in today's society, religious social categories function in this exact way. Furthermore, in a society that is increasingly polarized across religious and political lines, one can't help but think that the diagnosis offered by Malouki et al. is a large part of the explanation for why people adopt certain views or causes.

If what Malouki et al. suggest is correct, then Schwenkler's puzzle of doxastic transformation becomes even more pressing. The puzzle asks how it can be rational to expose oneself to things that might result in conversion given that conversion is doxastically transformative. Schwenkler suggests that whether one should open oneself up to conversion depends on whether the doxastic transformation would improve their epistemic situation. But obviously, this creates a tragic situation for someone whose worldview tells them it's rational to forego evidence—evidence that in fact would objectively improve their epistemic situation. As Schwenkler puts it:

What grounds this possibility is *not* that it is always irrational to make choices that threaten to change our core beliefs, but rather that what it is rational for us to do depends on what we know—and a person with a radically false worldview might be too ignorant to reason successfully about which choices will improve her epistemic situation. (210)

Given what Schwenkler and Malouki et al. say, things look pretty grim for contemporary American society, especially if one isn't rationally required to undergo transformative (doxastic) experiences as Paul and others argue. Thus, it might be worth investigating (a) whether these views are correct, and (b) whether there's a way to prevent continuing societal polarization in the event that they are correct.

Second, Evan Thompson argues that death—or rather, dying—is a special kind of “ultimate” transformative experience “against which or from which all other transformative experiences can be viewed” (269). Importantly, these ultimate transformations give us a meta-perspective on our life as a whole. This concept of ultimate transformative experiences raises interesting questions for philosophers of religion. Here, we'll use an example from Christianity to quickly illustrate why philosophers of religion ought to find this concept worthy of further exploration. The point likely generalizes to major milestones in other religions.

One might begin by wondering whether certain religious milestones qualify as ultimate transformative experiences. For instance, baptism, for some Christians, symbolizes a seismic shift in their lives—a process representative of being buried (dying!) with Christ so as to be raised with Christ into new life. While perhaps baptism is not final or inevitable in the same sense death is for Thompson, for those who attribute transformative significance to it, baptism tends to be an experience from which all other transformative experiences—including death!—can be viewed. (The mirror of this, apostasy, is often taken to involve a sort of spiritual death, and analogous points hold.) So, there may be a good case for baptism (and perhaps other religious milestones) counting as ultimate transformative experiences.

More significantly, conceptualizing these religious milestones as ultimate transformative experiences captures the specialness of religious transformative experiences. This raises the question of whether we should expect that ultimate transformations are unique: Is there more than one kind of ultimate transformation? Is it conceptually possible that at the end of a person's life, more than one of their transformations might count as ultimate, that is, offer a meta-perspective on their life as a whole? Asking these questions, especially with religious milestones lying in the background as ultimate transformative experiences, amounts to asking whether there are transformative experiences, like dying, that are as significant as our religious transformative experiences. It's asking whether some other transformation might stand as equal to a religious transformation in providing a meta-perspective on our life as a whole. These questions are worth exploring, and philosophers of religion might want to use Thompson's conception of ultimate transformative experience as a springboard to explore whether religious transformations have a unique role to play in providing a meta-perspective on our lives as a whole.