

Transformative Experiences

Continuing the Inquiry: Some Philosophical Questions

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Merlin CCC – January 2022

When we think closely about transformative experiences, we quickly find ourselves faced with quite a lot of more general philosophical problems. Here are a few suggestions for threads you may wish to follow, starting from our topic and leading outwards. Within a single workshop, there's only so far we can get in following these threads. Some of these are things that we might have introduced, or at least mentioned in passing, while others have been left entirely for this space.

1) We followed some hints given by Iris Murdoch and Matthew B. Crawford, where our model of transformative experience involves turning toward some actual good that exists independently of us, and is able, in some way or another, to make demands on us. This seems to be at odds with another model, which is at least hinted at by L.A. Paul, which is based on satisfying someone's more-or-less arbitrary preferences. Indeed, many of the challenges which Paul takes up in her book seem to be a result of assuming this "thin" account of preferences, without reference to a robust account of what's good for us.

It's worthwhile to place this contrast in the foreground of our attention, and really consider (a) what these different theories of preference and the good mean, considered on their own terms; (b) what they each imply—similarly or differently from each other—when applied to evaluating or making choices about transformative experiences; and (c) which *complete package*, consisting of a theory of preference and/or the good, together the corresponding account of transformation, we have good reasons to adopt as our own.

We might also ask: how similar or different is Paul's account of "the rational life" as a preference-maximizer, from the theory of purely instrumental rationality which Plato roundly critiques in the *Republic* (and elsewhere)?

2) The very concept of transformative experience suggests something with the power to radically shape or re-shape the structure and direction of our lives—whether or not we have deliberately chosen to undergo such a transformation. When we put it in these terms, the issue of freedom quickly looms large.

But what are we really after, when we talk about "freedom"?

In modern society, we're typically thinking of something that philosophers call "the freedom of indifference," which basically means, we're able to make a selection from a range of options, without anyone or anything else forcing us to making one choice rather than another. To say the same thing from a backward-looking perspective, freedom of indifference means that even though we actually did option A, we might just as well have done option B or C.

But in the ancient world, freedom was not based on indifference between equally available alternatives, but rather, on excellence and the attainment of our good. This is the sense in which a slave is unfree: not so much because the slave didn't get to decide what to do (even though that's also true), but because the work that a slave does is for his master's benefit, rather than his own. This kind of freedom, therefore, means that there are no obstructions or impediments that get in the way of our achieving genuine goodness or excellence.

Here's a modern furniture craftsman, George Walker, discussing the difference in terms of the freedom that an artisan can pursue:

While we moderns tend to think of freedom as the ability to choose between many possibilities, the pre-modern idea was conceived of as the pursuit of the "good." Freedom was understood more like a journey with a destination on the far horizon, a path that chose the good over and over again, gradually coming closer to fulfilling innate potential. This mindset permeated everything, including the creative arts. The artisan, through a series of refinements and a long process of choosing the good, searched for the ideal form—when a chair began to reflect its essential chairness.¹

So: when we give a philosophical account of transformative experiences, does that account assume or depend upon one of these ideas of freedom—either the freedom of indifference, or the freedom of excellence—rather than the other? Can we accept the notion of freedom that we're "helping ourselves to" in our arguments? And if not, how might we need to revise our arguments?

Alternatively: if we have other reasons, separate from transformative experience, to prefer one theory of freedom over the other, what does that entail for our account of transformation?

3) When we talk about "the good," does that leave room for a variety of *different* goods, which may apply to different people, circumstances, or projects? Or is "the good" something flat, uniform, without room for that sort of variation?

This comes into play when L.A. Paul contrasts values that are "impersonal and objective" with values (or preferences) that are "personal and subjective"? Is there any conceptual space for a third kind of values: ones which are personal (meaning that they are keyed to specific individuals in ways that are unique to them) but also objective (meaning that there's a fact of the matter—we can get them right or wrong—and they're not just "whatever we feel like")?

It's quite possible to read Plato's *Phaedrus* (and the other texts of Plato mentioned in the resource list) as suggesting exactly this. Is he right? And if so, how do we work out the details?

4) For more ways to extend the concepts we've talked about with the help of Plato's dialogues, see the "Further Explorations in Plato" from the workshop "Readings and Resources" list.

1 George Walker, "Axioms of Pre-Industrial Craft." *Mortise & Tenon Magazine*, issue VII (2019), page 131.