



# Familiar transformative experiences

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## Abstract

On the standard Paulian definition of epistemically transformative experiences (ETE), we can't know what an ETE is like before we have it. ETEs are new kinds of experiences and, importantly, can't be imagined—this is why they have a unique ability to teach us what a particular experience is like. Contra Paul, some philosophers (Sharadin, 2015; Wilkenfeld, 2016; Ismael, 2019; Kind, 2020; Daoust, 2021; Cath, 2022) have argued that transformative experiences *can* be imagined. A neglected consequence of this argument is that if transformative experiences can in fact be imagined, then it is unclear how they could be epistemically transformative. What do they teach us if we can imagine what they're like in advance? I will argue not only that imaginable experiences can be transformative, but that experiences of a kind which an agent is experientially acquainted with can also be transformative. This latter kind of transformative experiences, which I will call familiar transformative experiences, are transformative not because the agent learns what a new kind of experience is like—by definition, they are not new kinds of experiences—but because the transformativeness of the experience is brought out by features of the agent experiencing them. Epistemic transformation in these cases may be explained by facts about the agent's perspective and social environment, which allow them to appreciate elements of the experience they did not previously.

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## 1 Transformative experiences

Transformative experiences are experiences which are epistemically and personally transformative (Paul, 2014). Epistemically transformative experiences teach you something you can't learn without having the experience, namely, what the experience is like. Having the experience acquaints you with the phenomenal character of an experience. Sometimes, further change arises from the epistemic transformative aspect of the experience—when what you learn is so significant and perspective changing, it can change who you are and what you value (Paul, 2015: 476–477; 2017: 29). In these cases, the experience is also personally transformative. Examples of transformative experiences include the experience of becoming a parent, moving to a new country, and going to university.

Epistemically transformative experiences constitute a much broader class of experiences than transformative experiences. Merely epistemically transformative experiences include the major life experiences raised above, but also include non-personally transformative experiences such as having a new sensory or perceptual experience. Smelling a new scent, tasting a new food with a distinctive flavour, seeing an immense mountain for the first time or hearing a unique birdsong will all be epistemically transformative. While an experienced birdwatcher may be able to anticipate what an unheard birdsong might sound like, or a culinary expert might be able to make an educated guess about what a new food might taste like, actually hearing the birdsong or tasting the food will teach them something new, namely, what it actually sounds or tastes like. The experience teaches you something which you can't learn without having the experience itself. No amount of description of these experiences can give you knowledge of what these things will be like. This, crucially, is what gives transformative experiences their revelatory character—the 'fire of epistemic change' sculpts the newly transformed self (Paul, 2020: 22).

There are two important clarifications to make about the nature of epistemically transformative experiences before we proceed. First, the claim that epistemically transformative experiences cannot be imagined does not mean that we cannot conjure up any imagining whatsoever of what the experience might be like. You might be able to imagine, in some weak sense, what it might be like to be a parent prior to becoming a parent. The resulting imaginative model, however, is 'epistemically indeterminate' Villiger (2022: 4): without having experienced a certain type of transformative experience, there is no way to know whether the imaginative model you form accurately represents what it will be like to undergo the experience.<sup>1</sup> If the model turns out to accurately reflect what the experience is like, this will be by chance. Imaginative models not grounded by past experiences of the relevant kind are not a reliable way to discover what a transformative experience is like.

Second, there is a sense in which every experience could be considered epistemically transformative. I might know what it's like to eat apples generally, but I can't know what it's like to eat the *exact* apple that's in my hand right now. After all, it could differ ever so slightly in sweetness or ripeness than any apple I've had before!

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, talk of imagining transformative experiences refers only to imaginings which are epistemically determinable.

Paul addresses this worry and stipulates that transformative experiences must belong to a *kind* of experience that the agent has not had before:

Epistemically transformative experiences arise from having new kinds of experiences, not from new token experiences that are instances of the kinds of experiences you already know about. If you've had an experience of a particular kind already, you know enough about its dominant, that is, its kind-defining, properties to know what having an experience of that kind is like... Minor changes or variations in properties that are not the dominant, kind-defining properties of the experience are not relevant to knowing what that kind of experience is like. (Paul, 2014: 36)

How we delineate experiential kinds is an underdiscussed topic in the literature.<sup>2</sup> The standard line, given by Paul (2014: 37) is that experiential kinds are more or less coarse-grained—or, at least, they must not be too fine-grained, lest we will have to count every token of an experiential type as epistemically transformative. Excessive fine-graining of experiential kinds would lead to a proliferation of the problem that ETEs pose for decision making to include low-stakes ETEs, such as the decision to eat-this-specific-apple. Consequently, Paul suggests that we classify experiences based on which 'natural or ordinary kind' they fall into (ibid.). We end up with an intuitive way of delineating experiential kinds.

This is the Paulian view of transformative experiences. It involves personal and epistemic transformation, where the epistemic transformation is born out of coming to know what a new kind of experience is like. New kinds of experiences are unimaginable prior to having them. Yet, many transformative experiences do not conform to this characterisation—some paradigmatic instances of transformative experiences are not epistemically inaccessible in this way. A number of philosophers have argued that, in fact, most transformative experiences do not belong to radically new kinds and/or can be partially imagined.<sup>3</sup>

I will argue that there are transformative experiences which are not merely imaginable by an agent, but with which the agent is *already* experientially acquainted. I call these 'familiar transformative experiences.' Such experiences further press the issue of whether transformative experiences must be new kinds of experiences which are epistemically inaccessible. The following section will detail each type of epistemically accessible transformative experiences: first, imaginable transformative experiences, and second, familiar transformative experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> As it was in an earlier version of paper before the importance of this issue was highlighted by an anonymous reviewer. For further discussion of experiential kinds, see Paul (2017: 206; 2020: 17). Beyond Paul, it has received attention in passing in Dougherty et al. (2015: 312–313) and Kind (2020: 138–139). I will return to the wider implications of this in § 4.

<sup>3</sup> To note a few, Sharadin (2015), Wilkenfeld (2016), Ismael (2019), Kind (2020), Cath (2022), and Daoust (2021).

## 2 Imaginable transformative experiences

Paul (2014: 8–11) presents an adaptation of Jackson’s Mary’s Room as an illustrative example of an epistemically transformative experience. As in the standard case, Mary faces the experience of seeing red for the first time. This experience will be epistemically transformative for Mary—it will teach her what it’s like to see red. This is because what it’s like to see red is epistemically inaccessible to Mary before she experiences it first hand—there is no way she gain knowledge of what it’s like other than through experience. Similarly striking examples involving new sensory modalities are given, such as being offered a microchip which provides you with a new sensory modality (ibid.: 7), a blind man who is offered surgery regain his sight or a deaf person considering a cochlear implant (ibid.: 70). These examples illustrate the insurmountable epistemic barrier posed by transformative experiences.<sup>4</sup> It seems unfathomable that the imagination could bridge the epistemic gap between the agent and what these experiences are like, and so, experience is the only way to finding out. This much is largely uncontested.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the idea that *all* transformative experiences are epistemically inaccessible in the way the experience of seeing red is to Mary has been challenged, predominantly because a large proportion of transformative experiences seem to share at least *some* phenomenal characteristics with other, more mundane experiences. Consider the following examples:

I1) *Hospitalisation* - Andrew is a doctor who has spent his entire career working in the emergency department of a hospital. Andrew empathises with his patients and frequently imagines what it must be like for them to endure their suffering to inform his approach to care. Andrew has never had a personal health emergency which required a trip to the emergency department, but it seems undeniable that he has a detailed understanding of what patients experience on his ward. He knows how patients are treated, what they should expect during their stay and so on. Andrew goes to the emergency department following an accident and finds himself transformed by the experience. While no parts of the experience were unexpected, the process of actually experiencing it gave him a deeper understanding of the patient experience and an appreciation for his colleagues that he had not felt before.

I2) *Marriage* - Ben is considering proposing to his partner. He knows a lot about his partner, including what it’s like to live with them. Married life should not be too different from unmarried life, he thinks. The wedding itself will be interesting and new, but the humdrum of day-to-day life shouldn’t be so different that it is out of his imaginative grasp. Even if the marriage changes him in unforeseeable ways, the time he has spent with his partner prior to getting

<sup>4</sup> See Paul (2014; 2017) and Helton and Register (2023) for arguments that transformative experiences are unimaginable. For related arguments about the difficulty of learning what an experience is like from different perspectives, see Ramirez et al. (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Barring Kind (2020), who suggests that even these kinds of experiences might be imaginable by a sufficiently skilled imaginer.

married should give him the ability to imagine what it will be like to be married to them. Ben and his partner marry and he finds that while married life is much the same, his bond with his partner deepens and his perspective on what matters most in his life changes.

Andrew and Ben's experiences are new kinds of experiences for them. Though Andrew has worked in a hospital for many years, he had never been hospitalised up until that point. Ben had been in a long-term relationship with his partner, but never been married before. Both are personally transformed by their experiences. However, the experiences were not epistemically inaccessible to them prior to their experiences in the same way that red was inaccessible to Mary—Andrew and Ben's experiences are similar to their previous or observed experiences.

On this point, it might be objected that experiences can be categorized into a number of kinds, and that these experiences are tokens of experiential kinds which are not new for these agents. For instance, Andrew's experience as an in-patient might be more coarse-grainedly categorised as an experience of being cared for. He has been cared for before e.g. by his parents, and so in this sense, the experience belongs to a familiar experiential kind for him. Ben's experience of marriage could be categorised into a broader kind of experience which involves being in a long-term relationship. Hence, it is unsurprising that they can at least partially imagine what these experiences are like. I do not deny that their experiences *also* fit into these kinds, but for our purposes, the relevant kind is best specified as experiences of in-patient hospitalisation and marriage, rather than the broader categories they might fit into. And these kinds are precisely those with which the agents are unacquainted with, and, plausibly, induce transformation.<sup>6</sup>

Previous or observed experiences can provide a basis for partially imagining what new kinds of experiences might be like. What the agents experience might not strictly match what they had imagined or experienced previously, but the phenomenal character will not be completely outwith their grasp. Given that their imaginings are grounded in similar or observed experiences, it would be surprising if there was no overlap whatsoever in what they imagined and what they experienced. Proponents for the idea that transformative experiences are at least partially imaginable include by Kind (2020), Ismael (2019) Cath (2022), Daoust (2021) and Wilkenson (2016).

The most general argument for the imaginability of transformative experiences is Cath's (2022) Modelling Argument. It draws attention to a fundamental similarity between cognitive models formed on the basis of the memory of past experience and those formed on the basis of the imagination—both models are reconstructive and both are imperfect. Models constructed on the basis of past experiences which are of the same kind as the target experience are unlikely to perfectly represent the target future experience. If we are to accept that imperfect models based on memory of relevantly similar events can teach us what an experience is like, then we ought to accept imperfect models based on the imagination can teach us what an experience is like. Otherwise, we have to reject Paul's (2014: 36) claim from §1 that having experiences of a particular kind enables us to imagine experiences of that same kind.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

If we can construct imperfect imaginative models which are as good as the imperfect models based on memory, this allows an expansion of the number of transformative experiences considered to be imaginable beyond those had by agents in epistemically privileged positions such as Andrew and Ben. Cath argues that, aside from a small subset of radical transformative experiences (e.g. gaining a new sensory modality), we can form cognitive models of transformative experiences good enough to provide us with knowledge of what the experience is like. Consequently, imperfect models *must* be sufficient to provide us with access to what an experience is like, because even a model constructed on the basis of past experiences of the same kind is unlikely to perfectly represent a future experience, (ibid.: 6–9).

The upshot is that we must accept that imperfect and partial cognitive models provide us with knowledge of what an experience is like, lest we reject that the imagination can teach us what any experience is like, whether it is based on experience or not. If imperfect and partial modelling based on experience is sufficient to allow us to approximately judge what an experience will be like, then we will have partial epistemic access to what transformative experiences might be like. Thus, Andrew and Ben have partial epistemic access to what it might be like to be hospitalized and get married respectively. They may not be able to fully grasp these experiences in advance, there will be some aspects which they fail to anticipate, but they certainly have a better idea of what to expect than Mary does when she emerges from her black and white room.

A neglected consequence of arguing for the epistemic accessibility of transformative experiences is that such experiences will no longer fit the standard Paulian definition of transformative experience. Transformative experiences are defined as epistemically *inaccessible*, meaning that we can't reliably imagine them in advance. It is only by undergoing the experience and being epistemically transformed that we gain the ability to imagine, from the first-person perspective, what it is like to have that experience. There is a tension between this view and accepting that transformative experiences are at least partially imaginable, for to be partially imaginable is to be (partially) epistemically accessible.

As noted at the beginning of this section, this definition is fitting in cases of radical transformations, but it is unclear what we should make of experiences which are partially epistemically accessible, especially those which have traditionally been considered to be transformative experiences. Were we wrong to classify partially imaginable experiences as transformative in the first place, or are they still transformative experiences? How we answer these questions will lead us to either (1) significantly reduce the number of experiences considered to be transformative, or (2) argue that an epistemic gap remains in partially imaginable experiences and so they fit the spirit, though not the letter, of Paul's definition. I will discuss each in turn.

Starting with 1), we might accept that our intuitive judgements about which experiences count as transformative are incorrect and reject partially imaginable experiences as transformative experiences, in line with Paul's original definition.<sup>7</sup> Cath

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<sup>7</sup> The idea that we are mistaken about the imaginability of some experiences and that, as a consequence, the subset of unimaginable transformative experiences is smaller than first thought appears in Cath (2022: 21), Kind (2020: 144) and Daoust (2021: 10).

(2022: 21) makes a move in this direction in response to a related worry. He suggests that we ought to recharacterise transformative experiences as experiences which we can, at best, form poor cognitive models of. Technically, this isn't a recharacterisation. Paulian transformative experiences are intended to be epistemically inaccessible to agents, such that they can't form accurate imaginative models without having had the relevant kind of experience (see § 1 for this point). Since Cath argues for the widespread imaginability of transformative experiences, his suggestion amounts to a widespread relegation of a number of paradigmatic transformative experiences to the class of non-transformative experiences. This move would exclude cases such as Andrew's and Ben's from being cases of transformative experiences, since they can both form accurate cognitive models of their target experiences. Some paradigmatic transformative experiences such as parenthood and starting a new career would also cease to count as transformative experiences, at least in cases where the agent has some grasp on what these experiences will be like. The label of 'transformative experience' would then only apply a small subset of radically new experiences, e.g. acquiring new sensory modalities and those had by agents in poor epistemic standings.<sup>8</sup> This, in my view, does not capture the broader phenomena that Paul (2014) and others in the dialectic set out to discuss. Given that there are more promising ways to respond, I will set this view aside.

The second possible way to proceed is to accept that while we can imagine transformative experiences to some extent, the discrepancies between our cognitive models and the actual experience mean that a significant epistemic gap remains. Thus, bridging this gap by having the experience may still be epistemically transformative. One way to maintain this position would be to accept that transformative experiences teach us what Friedman (2015: 6) calls 'exact phenomenal information', i.e. experiential acquaintance with the nature of the specific experience that we undergo. Since our imaginings never match our actual experiences perfectly, they may remain epistemically transformative. Experience is still the only way to bridge the epistemic gap. Paul explicitly rejects this, as does Friedman and so this option will be set aside.<sup>9</sup> In short, while this allows the above paradigmatic transformative experiences to remain epistemically transformative, the argument goes too far. Even if we are well acquainted with an experiential type, every experience of that type will have the potential to be transformative due to minor variations in what the experience is like.

But we needn't resort to exact phenomenal information to respond in this second way. We can take a less objectionable position and claim that the partial imaginative models allow for the agent to remain sufficiently ignorant such that transformative experiences are still revelatory. On such a view, the imagination isn't rendered powerless, though nor can it teach us what new kinds of experiences are like. A proponent of this account might define transformative experiences as having some imaginable aspects, but still involving some unimaginable novel aspects. The unimaginable aspects are not minutiae—they cause a significant difference in what it is like to have

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<sup>8</sup> That only agents who are in a poor epistemic position might find more experiences to be transformative may well be true. However, the converse claim that agents in a good epistemic position are unlikely to find experiences to be transformative due to their imaginative prowess is questionable.

<sup>9</sup> See Friedman (2015) and Paul (2014: 36–38) for arguments against this proposal.

the experience. Transformative experiences would not involve complete novelty, but have a distinct enough phenomenal character to be epistemically transformative in the way Paul describes. So the imagination can, at best, give us an idea of what might be to come based on relevant kinds of past experiences.<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps an alternative way of reading Cath's (2022) proposal for the imaginability of transformative experiences. More aligned with Paul (2014) and Lewis (1988), a proponent of this view can maintain that experience is the best teacher. I find this to be a reasonable position.

However, I contend that imaginable transformative experiences are not red herrings which can be so easily accounted for. I believe that they cast important doubts on the idea that epistemic, and subsequently personal, transformation is catalysed by learning what a *new kind of experience is like*. In the subsequent section, I will argue that learning what a new kind of phenomenal character is like is not always at the root of what makes experiences transformative. In fact, even experiences of kinds that we have had multiple times and thus are well acquainted with it, an experience of that kind can, at a later stage, be transformative. Even if one is inclined to explain imaginable transformative experiences by accepting that some phenomenological novelty is present, this explanation is much less plausible in the cases I present. In these cases, we have direct experiential acquaintance with a particular kind of experience. The novelty which the above view suggests is that the cause of epistemic transformation is either insufficient or absent in the cases I present. And yet these familiar experiences appear to have the hallmarks of a transformative experience. We thus must ask, in virtue of what are these familiar experiences transformative, and what, if anything, causes the epistemic gap which grounds the transformative character of that experience?

### 3 Familiar transformative experiences

So far, we've seen that many purported instances of transformative experiences don't fit the standard Paulian characterisation of being epistemically inaccessible, as they can be imagined in advance. With the scene set for scepticism about the original limitations placed on what counts as a transformative experience, I now want to focus on transformative experiences which are not merely imaginable, but are in fact familiar to the agent. The experience is undeniably imaginable by the agent, as it simply isn't new to them. Perhaps they have had that kind of experience before and it hasn't been transformative, but on having it again (or for the  $n^{\text{th}}$  time), it is transformative. Or the experience was transformative before and it is transformative again. Take the following cases as illustrative examples:

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<sup>10</sup> The partial imaginability of transformative experiences is typically used to argue that we can make transformative decisions rationally. It is important to note here that this paper focuses on the consequences of eroding the epistemically inaccessible nature of transformative experiences, rather than discussing issues relating to how we ought to make transformative decisions.



R1) *Therapy* - Sally has completed a number of courses of therapy to attempt to combat her depression. She has tried CBT, DBT, person-centred talking therapy and so on. None have worked. She is disillusioned with the idea of therapeutic support and improvement and thinks therapy can't help her. Still, encouraged by her new group of friends, she decides to try therapy again. She finds another therapist and begins work on her mental health. After a few sessions, she manages to work through a number of her problems and her mental health improves dramatically. She feels like she can be herself again after many years of feeling detached and unable to connect with herself.

R2) *BASE Jumping* - Sam was tempted to attempt his first BASE jump by the allure of the thrills. He did not take any meaning from his first experience of jumping but continued for the rush that it gave him. Upon revisiting a particularly nerve-racking jump on which he had expected to struggle, he found he was able to manage his emotions and approach the jump in a calmer way than he had previously. This led to a realisation—that his newfound ability to manage his emotions in order to overcome a challenge was not restricted to BASE jumping. No challenges in his personal life were as high stakes as the challenges involved in jumping. The skills he had developed through engaging in this extreme sport were applicable to other aspects of his life. This particular jump had transformed him—he learned that he was able to manage his emotions and overcome challenges which he struggled with through BASE jumping. Achieving this feat enriches his life in a way that no other jump had, even though he had experienced this particular jump before.

R3) *Living alone* - Patrick knows what it's like to live alone and to be independent, but somehow returning to this state after leaving a significant, long-term relationship has caused living alone to feel significantly differently than it did before. Tasks which once blended into the mundanity of life become taxing. Patrick was changed by the relationship, and now finds that this once familiar experience has taken on a new character, which results in even further changes to who he is. As he masters the various aspects of living alone, he becomes more confident not only in living alone, but more generally as his independence regrows. He sees even mundane chores in a new light because they form part of his fresh start as his new, confident self.

First, the above cases do not involve new *kinds* of experiences for their respective agents, at least if individuated in a sufficiently coarse-grained way. Sally has been to numerous courses of therapy, Sam has BASE jumped a number of times and Patrick has lived alone before. These agents are not only imaginatively acquainted with the kind of experiences they are facing, they are experientially acquainted with them. In Cath's (2019: 113; 2022: 4) terminology, each agent has 'gold-standard' knowledge of what that kind of experience is like, that is, experiential knowledge based in that experience's appearing a particular way to the agent. Thus, their experiences aren't naturally classified as new kinds of experiences for them.<sup>11</sup> Yet, each agent appears

<sup>11</sup> This does not require accepting that the phenomenal character of each agent's experiences are identical. There can be variation of the phenomenal character of experiences of the same kind. Whether these experi-

to be at least personally transformed by their experience. The idea that transformative experiences are not always new kinds of experiences has been suggested in the literature (Kind, 2020), though what makes these experiences transformative has not been explored.

Let's begin with Sally's case. I take it that therapy is typically a straightforwardly transformative experience. When an agent goes to therapy for the first time, she learns what therapy is like. She is given the opportunity to talk through her problems with a professional and develops a deeper understanding of who she is and why she became the person she is, which can be both epistemically and personally transformative. The experience of being listened to and discussing one's experiences and problems with a therapist in itself may be radically new and incite great personal growth. Consequently, if Sally hadn't been to therapy before, her experience would count as transformative on Paul's account.

However, Sally's experience was not her first experience of therapy. She had a number of therapeutic experiences—numerous sessions with numerous therapists. She is clearly acquainted with what therapy is like. It is undeniable that she was experientially acquainted with what it's like to undergo therapy, and must have undergone the epistemic transformation at some point prior to the meaningful instance of therapy which changed her. Why did learning what the experience was like not cause her to transform the first time, but she was transformed upon revisiting the experience of therapy? While Sally was certainly posed many of the same questions and thoughts as she had been in previous courses of therapy, one key factor which may have changed her experience is that she is surrounded by a different social environment.<sup>12</sup> Her new friends are encouraging and supportive of her going to therapy, which is a factor which has been associated with better therapeutic outcomes (Quirk, Smith and Owen, 2018). Each specific therapist and whether she formed a therapeutic relationship with them is likely to have impacted the different outcomes of the therapy she underwent.<sup>13</sup>

While going to therapy multiple times before might have taught her what the experience would be like, it is only when her social environment was conducive to change that she learned the skills she needs to manage her depression. Having an experience of a particular kind, even having it multiple times, is enough for the agent to learn what the experience is like, but not always enough for an agent to learn *from* the experience. The epistemic transformation does not come from mere experiential acquaintance, but from having the experience when other factors in her life were conducive to change. Changes in an agent's social environment do not alter the kind of experience the agent has, but can be a determining factor in what and whether the agent is able to learn from it, enabling them to reconceptualise their self-concept, their worldview and whether they grow from process. Sally's case shows that that *whether* an experience is transformative (that is, whether its transformative potential

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ences ought to be considered to be new kinds of experiences will be discussed in §4.

<sup>12</sup> See also Barnes (2015) for a discussion of how social factors can influence the ease at which certain transformations can occur.

<sup>13</sup> See Hill and Castonguay (2017) for an overview of the effects that therapists can have on patient outcomes.

can be fully realised) may depend on facts about the agent and their perspective, not only on the experience itself. Sally's case suggests that there may be conditions which determine whether an experience is epistemically and/or personally transformative which stem from the agent, rather than the experience.

Second, Sam's case. Again, if Sam's personal transformation had occurred after his first experience of BASE jumping, it would be straightforwardly classified as a transformative experience. Say he found that his perspective was changed by his first experience BASE jumping, it would be natural to attribute his personal transformation to the epistemic transformation he undergoes when he discovers what BASE jumping is like in this case.<sup>14</sup> However, Sam's epistemic transformation in learning what it's like to BASE jump was not associated with a personal transformation.<sup>15</sup> Only after jumping multiple times and then revisiting a challenging jump did Sam find the experience to be genuinely personally transformative. This transformation seems unrelated to learning what the experience of BASE jumping is like. What Sam learns about himself and his skills seems to be caused in part by his expectations about the difficulty of the jump being violated, and in part by the nature of BASE jumping. Extreme sports, or nature sports more generally, can lead to a temporary change in perspective as they require you to focus intensely on the task at hand. This perspective change can allow you to step back and consider aspects of your life differently. I see no reason to think that the perspective shifts and skill development which result in personal transformation can only take place during the first instance of engaging with an extreme sport like BASE jumping.<sup>16</sup> The transformative instance of BASE jumping that Sam experienced led to a reevaluation of the value of the skills he developed and their applicability to the rest of his life. His expectations about the experience are at least part of the reason why he is transformed by this particular experience of BASE jumping rather than any of his previous experiences. Sam's case suggests that whether an agent is transformed and what they learn from the experience is dependent on his expectations about the experience, not just the experience itself.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Patrick. Patrick does not learn what it's like to live alone—he already knows what it's like, he has done it before. However, since he last lived alone, he has been transformed by his relationship and its ending. He has a new appreciation for his independence such that actually living alone is fulfilling for him in a way that it wasn't previously. This change in perspective enables the experience of living alone to take on a new character, which I contend re-endows it with the capacity to be transformative. Differences in phenomenal character due to shifts in perspective are

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<sup>14</sup> This is admittedly slightly unrealistic—you can't go BASE jumping (at least not safely!) with no training whatsoever beforehand. However, the example can easily be substituted with e.g. climbing a mountain for the first time or any similarly high risk sport which requires less or no training before first engaging in it.

<sup>15</sup> Other than developing in him the desire to go BASE jumping again, though we can stipulate that this was not personally transformative in a significant sense.

<sup>16</sup> See Brymer and Oades (2009) and Holmbom et al. (2017) for examples of personally transformative effects of extreme sports which take place over a span of time.

<sup>17</sup> See Villiger (2022) for an argument for the related claim that expectations can determine whether a transformative experience is positively or negatively valenced.

relatively commonplace—the experience of seeing or doing something for the first time since you were a child often causes you to notice that it feels different than it did. You have changed significantly since you last encountered the experience, so it is natural that its phenomenological character differs when you encounter it as your new self with your radically different worldview. This is a more extreme case than Patrick's, but the underlying phenomenon is the same nevertheless. Approaching an experience from a different perspective can cause it to take on a new phenomenological character. The greater the difference in perspective, the more jarring and potentially transformative this difference can be. How Patrick is epistemically transformed by this experience can be cast in Paulian terms. Perhaps what he learns is what it's like to have the experience from a new perspective. Or which features of the experience are salient to him differ because of his new perspective, teaching him what it's like to have the experience when different characteristics are central in defining the experience. This isn't because Patrick has had a new kind of experience, but is rather having the same experience and seeing it through a new lens, which allows him to learn different things from it, e.g. value of independence. Patrick's case suggests that whether an agent is transformed and what they learn from the experience is dependent on their perspective and self-concept, not always the newness of the experience.

Thus far, the broad strokes suggestion has been that experiences can be transformative even if they belong to a kind that the agent is experientially acquainted with. I have suggested that a number of factors may influence whether an experience is transformative, including social environment, expectations and changed perspective. However, there are a number of objections which could be made to the above interpretations of the cases and the view. I will go through them in the following section and precisify the view in the process.

## 4 Objections

The first objection is akin to the first response given to the possibility of imaginable transformative experiences. That is, if the experience is not epistemically transformative in the way set out by Paul, then it cannot be transformative. In other words, if an agent is experientially acquainted with a kind of experience, experiences of that kind cannot be epistemically transformative, and therefore nor can they be transformative. The above examples are merely personally transformative—this is why they do not count as transformative experiences proper, as they aren't epistemically transformative. Once you've had the experience, you know what it's like, so having it again doesn't teach you anything new and shouldn't have any revelatory potential. Your first time living alone teaches you what it's like to live alone, further iterations of this experience shouldn't teach you anything new, at least not to the extent that it becomes a transformative experience.

I don't think this is quite right. Paul's definition sets out to capture clear cases of transformative experiences which we can decide to have, rather than to stipulate the limits of this class of experiences. I think there is a sense in which familiar transformative experiences are both epistemically and personally transformative, though perhaps not in the sense that Paul sets out. The cases above suggest that prior epistemic

access to an experiential kind needn't prevent that experience from being transformative. Rather, people can experience a perspective shift or personal transformation as a result of an experience they have had a number of times, simply because seeing an experience of a particular kind with a different perspective can allow them to appreciate different aspects of an experiential kind they're acquainted with.

While Sally, Patrick and Sam do not learn what a new kind of experience is like due to their familiarity with the kind-defining features of the experience, they do learn something in the course of having these experiences. What an transformative experience is like (and hence, whether it is transformative) depends not only on the characteristics of the experience itself, but on the agent too. The changes which come with a transformative experience are pervasive and affect a number of aspects of your life—your identity, your beliefs, your desires, finances, career, social relationships, familial relationships and so on. *The reverse is also true*. Aspects of your life which aren't inherently part of the experience affect what the experience is like. Experiences aren't quarantined from other aspects of our lives and shouldn't be considered in isolation from them.

The idea that what an experience is like is sensitive to such factors is not a new idea. One can find similar theses in the philosophy of mind (e.g. Stoljar, 2016; Ramirez et al., 2021), aesthetics (e.g. Carroll, 2012; Stecker, 1997; 2019), and in the philosophy of religion (Hick, 1989: 140–143) to give just a few examples.<sup>18</sup> My proposal is the related idea that the *transformativeness* of a transformative experience is dependent on these factors. What an experience is like affects whether and how it is transformative, and thus our conception of transformative experiences ought to take this into account. What an experience is like is not limited by the experiential kind it belongs to—there can be enormous variation of phenomenal character within a particular kind such that learning one way that kind of experience can be like may be enormously transformative, or not transformative at all.

A second objection is that in accepting my proposal, the class of transformative experiences expands beyond those which involve an agent becoming acquainted with a new experiential kind. Whether an experience is transformative will be less predictable, and the class of transformative experiences becomes much less unified. However, I contend that this is a more accurate conception of transformative experiences and should be accepted regardless. As Barnes (2015: 178) briefly notes of the experience of parenthood that it isn't a kind of experience that is transformative *simpliciter*. Transformativeness is not a property of any kind of experience, rather, whether an experience is transformative depends on a unique and complex combination of factors within an agent's life, converging to give rise to transformation.

Even if one is sympathetic to these responses, it is clear that the cases admit of an alternative interpretation which is important to rule out. The idea is simply that familiar transformative experiences *are* new kinds of experiences. That they are transformative is itself evidence that they belong to a different experiential kind than the past experiences which we initially lumped them in with! The agents had an experience

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<sup>18</sup> These views do not all converge on this point and sometimes the claim is peripheral to the account or argument in the work. However, this broad characterisation simply serves to note that the idea is present in a number of areas of philosophy.

with a distinct phenomenal character, distinct enough that their experience falls into a different kind. Sally's experience ought to be reclassified as belonging to the more fine-grained kind of effective-therapy experiences, Patrick's into living-alone-after-leaving-a-long-term-relationship, and Sam's into being in a long-term-relationship-with-a-serious-commitment. The differences between their experiences and the more coarse-grained kinds that their experiences belong to are significant enough such that they are not comparable to the example of the apples from §1.<sup>19</sup>

I am inclined to reject this picture. New kinds of experiences were taken to be unimaginable because they contained new phenomenal concepts which we could not grasp without having the relevant experiences, comparable to Mary's inability to imagine what it's like to see red, or a congenitally blind person's inability to grasp that it is like to see. We don't know the defining characteristics of that kind of experience. If we fine-grain experiential kinds, to accommodate this picture, the epistemic barrier posed by new kinds of experience becomes much weaker. For, if we separate successful and unsuccessful instances of therapy into separate kinds, that one kind is epistemically inaccessible to an agent who has experienced one but not the other is much less plausible. Secondly, the response appears to concede that transformative-ness is sensitive to these factors and classify them into new kinds of experiences as a result. This, to me, seems to misplace the significance. Having, for example, a good support network in Sally's case, doesn't change the phenomenal character of having therapy to the point that it becomes a distinct kind of experience. It is the state of Sally's life *outside* of her experiences of therapy that are conducive to Sally's transformation, rather than therapy itself taking on new phenomenal features.

I propose that whether transformation occurs is dependent on the perspective that the agent takes on the experience and which aspects of the experience are made salient to them on that perspective. The experience itself does not change and require categorizing into a new kind of experience—Sally's perspective and the aspects of the experience she focuses on simply change. Accepting this proposal will mean that what makes an experience transformative will be much more complex than encountering a distinctly new experiential kind. One possible alternative source of epistemic transformation, suggested by the cases above, is that epistemic transformation could be caused that what you can learn about yourself or different aspects of an experience becoming salient due to a perspective shift. As in Patrick's case, he had lived alone previously, but only once his perspective was changed by his relationship was he able to learn the value of independence *from* the experience of living alone. The epistemic transformation which occurs may be significant, personal *realisations*, rather than revelations.

To sum up, I contend that whether an experience is transformative is sensitive to an agent's social environment, expectations, perspective and prior transformations. Sensitivity to these factors means that transformation will not be explainable by an experience belonging to a new kind. This is not to say that we ought to reject Paul's definition. Agents who are transformed by familiar experiences are epistemically and personally transformed. However, the discussion of familiar transformative experiences suggests that a crucial factor has been ignored in the Paulian definition of trans-

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing my attention to this objection.

formative experiences, namely, the agent undergoing the experience. It is still true that Sally, Sam and Patrick learn something which is epistemically inaccessible without experience. The agent comes away with new knowledge or a deeper understanding about themselves, their lives, and/or their experience which results in a change in perspective and self-concept. Thus, we shouldn't only focus on what an experience is like, but what it's like in the context of the agent's life. Transformative experiences embed themselves in our lives and interact with a number of elements present in our lives. Social environment, having endured separate transformative experiences and revisiting old experiences, and fresh starts are presumably only a few of many potential sources which could result in revelation. The epistemic transformation in these cases isn't learning what the experience is like, but being supported enough to learn what the experience has to teach you, finding different meanings in the same experience, or learning how an experience has impacted you and how this change affects your life. The transformativeness of an experience is not a property of that experience per se, but dependent on the both the experience itself *and* the agent.

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