



# Personal identity, transformative experiences, and the future self

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## Abstract

The article explores the relation between personal identity and life-changing decisions such as the decision for a certain career or the decision to become a parent. According to L.A. Paul (Paul 2014), decisions of this kind involve “transformative experiences”, to the effect that - at the time we make a choice - we simply don’t know what it is like for us to experience the future situation. Importantly, she claims that some new experiences may be “personally transformative” by which she means that one may become a “new kind of person” having a different subjective perspective and “identity”. The article discusses this understanding of a transformed future self. It will be argued that different notions of identity can be distinguished with respect to Paul’s claim: the notion of identity in the sense of a (core) personality as well as the notion of numerical identity in the sense of sameness. By distinguishing these two notions it will become more clear how a future experience may indeed qualify as “personally transformative”. Moreover, it will be shown that the notion of a self-understanding of persons helps to further clarify the kind of change at issue.

**Keywords** Transformative experience · Personal identity · Self-understanding · Future self

## 1 Introduction

As persons we face major decisions every now and then throughout our lives: should we move to a foreign country to take up a job opportunity or should we rather stay at the place we so far have lived at? Should we move in with our partner we have been in a relationship with for some time? Should we become a parent or rather stay childless? Such decisions may substantially impact one’s life. They may be “life-changing” in the sense that the new situation may be substantially different from the pre-decision situation: the future situation

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will offer a variety of completely new experiences, and having these new experiences may, in turn, impact the way we value certain things in life. Crucially, this may also change ourselves as persons. In her much discussed book, L.A. Paul calls such life-changing decisions “personally transformative” by which she means that one may become a “new kind of person” having a different subjective perspective (Paul 2014, 16). But what does this precisely mean? How is the prospect of “becoming a new kind of person” related to the sense of identity, the self-understanding as an individual person and to the awareness of a persisting subject across time? In order to find answers to these questions I will discuss Paul’s understanding of a transformed future self. It will be argued that we can make sense of two different notions of identity with respect to Paul’s claim, which need to be distinguished: the notion of identity in the sense of a (core) personality as well as the notion of numerical identity in the sense of sameness. By distinguishing these two notions it will become more clear how a future experience may qualify as “personally transformative”. Discussing Paul’s approach in light of the notion of personal identity has two objectives: getting a better understanding of Paul’s concept of “personally transformative experiences” on the one hand and rendering the concept of personal identity more precise on the other hand.

My argument will proceed as follows: (2) In the next section, I will outline Paul’s view on experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative. The primary focus will be Paul’s notion of a transformed future self due to undergoing a transformative experience. (3) I will then suggest a conceptual distinction between two notions of identity that are in my view in need to be held apart to avoid confusion and unwarranted claims. (4) In the last part, I will apply those two concepts to Paul’s argument. This will clarify in what sense some decisions may indeed qualify as “personally transformative”. I will argue that to discuss the approach in light of the metaphysical problem of personal identity, a further independent argument as to what the persistence of persons consists in would have to be provided.

## 2 The transformed future self according to Paul

In her much-discussed book “Transformative Experience” (Paul 2014) L.A. Paul addresses a sort of paradox that arises when making decisions whose outcome is an experience that is radically different from anything one has previously experienced. To start with a simple example, consider you are thinking about trying an exotic fruit for the very first time.<sup>1</sup> Prior to actually eating the fruit you don’t know what this experience will be like, and, connected to this, whether you will like or dislike the taste of the fruit. Other people who have already tasted the fruit may try to describe the particular taste to you. They may, for instance, explain how it is comparable to tastes of other fruits you have had before. As a result, you may be in position to closely imagine the taste of the exotic fruit. However, according to Paul, this is not enough: unless you haven’t actually tried the fruit yourself you don’t know what it is like to taste it and how to evaluate its taste.<sup>2</sup> You are lacking a certain experiential knowledge. This echoes Frank Jackson’s famous thought experiment about the super-intelligent scientist

<sup>1</sup> This example is discussed by Paul (see Paul 2014, 35 ff.).

<sup>2</sup> This conclusion is criticized by, for example, Amy Kind (2020). She objects that Paul underestimates the effectiveness of imagination and argues that imagination is indeed capable of teaching fundamentally new experiences.

Mary who knows everything about the nature of color vision, including all scientific facts, but who has never seen colors herself as she has spent her entire life in a black and white environment (Jackson 1982). Now when Mary finally leaves her black and white cave and sees a red object for the very first time, it seems reasonable to say that she will learn something new: she now knows what it is like to have a red color experience. Paul takes this example to illustrate one kind of “transformative experiences” (Paul 2014, 8 ff.). They are transformative in an epistemic sense as one does not know what they are like unless one undergoes them oneself. As a result, prior to having these new experiences with their own phenomenology one is unable to assign a value to those experiences. It is precisely this sort of ignorance, which, according to Paul, creates a problem for normative decision theory: in order to rationally decide about a future situation, one should evaluate possible outcomes, rate the expected value of each outcome - based on one’s preferences - and their likeliness to occur. According to normative decision theory, one should choose the action with the highest expected value of a possible outcome. Now if, as in the case of transformative experiences, one is unable to assign a subjective value to a possible outcome one cannot choose rationally.<sup>3</sup> This is the basic line of argument Paul defends in view of *epistemically* transformative experiences.

Of interest here is however a further kind of transformative experiences Paul takes into focus: some radically new experiences are not only epistemically transformative as in the exotic fruit example but also *personally* transformative. According to Paul, some experiences are deeply transformative so that they literally change you as a person: they change “what it is like for you to be you”, “your point of view” and “the kind of person you are” (Paul 2014, 16). Personally transformative experiences and the impact they have on subjects of experiences are in fact central to Paul’s whole argument. It is all the more surprising that Paul leaves it with relatively vague statements as to how such experiences precisely impact persons or more generally personhood. With the following considerations I would therefore like to offer a clarification of Paul’s approach. The main question will be: What kind of person-related changes can reasonably be meant to be an outcome of personally transformative experiences?

As a first approximation it is useful to look at the type of experiences that, according to Paul, may cause a transformation of the person: becoming a biological parent for the first time,<sup>4</sup> starting a particular profession, having a life-prolonging surgery with severe side effects or (a more exotic example) becoming a vampire. Again, the examples are construed such that - like in the case of tasting a fruit for the first time - prior to actually having the experience in question one profoundly ignores what the experience will be like and whether one will love or hate it. Additionally, however, one does not know how the new experiences, for instance, of becoming a biological parent for the first time, impact the life one currently lives, in what way these experiences may literally be life-changing. Importantly, Paul calls them “personally” transformative and not “life” transformative. In what sense can the experiences in question be said to *transform* the person involved, that is, the subject of experience?

<sup>3</sup> Paul claims that in such cases one cannot *in principle* make a rational choice (e.g., Paul 2014, 20). This strong claim has been criticized on various grounds (e.g., by Dougherty et al. 2015; Arvan 2015; Kind 2020, see previous footnote). I mostly agree with these objections and arguments and also think that Paul’s conclusion in view of normative decision theory is too strong.

<sup>4</sup> “Biological” refers to the procedure of physically producing a child, of growing a child inside one’s body and as parents being subject to a hormonal change etc. (Paul 2014, 77–78).

It is important to note, first, that Paul is dealing with personally transformative experiences - like in the case of tasting an exotic fruit for the first time as described above - from the point of view of decision-making: an agent finds herself in a situation where she decides for or against an action involving a transformative experience. This places the phenomenon in a time-frame that is particularly relevant to the present considerations: the starting point is an agent who makes a decision at a given time ( $t_1$ ) in view of herself in a future scenario ( $t_2$ ). What is at stake is the perspective of an agent at  $t_1$  relating to the perspective of 'herself' at  $t_2$ . I will call the latter of the two relata "future self".

In order to better understand in what sense the future self may be subject to a transformation it is useful to take a closer look at the kind of paradox that, according to Paul, arises when someone makes a decision in which personally transformative experiences play a role. Again, like in the case of decisions involving "only" epistemically transformative experiences - like deciding whether to have an exotic fruit for the first time - decisions of the present kind create a further problem for normative decision theory. As pointed out above, making a decision requires to evaluate possible outcomes based on one's preferences. That is, one makes a decision at  $t_1$  to do X based on one's current preferences (call them  $t_1$ -preferences). One chooses a possible outcome at  $t_2$  with the highest expected value and which is most likely to occur. However, due to the personally transformative experience which one undergoes following the decision, one's preferences at  $t_2$  ( $t_2$ -preferences) may be very different from one's  $t_1$ -preferences. Thus the case could arise that choosing X is in accordance with  $t_1$ -preferences but turns out to be in discordance with  $t_2$ -preferences. And again, without knowing how one's preferences evolve due to transformative experiences one is unable to assign a value to a possible outcome of a given decision. Therefore, Paul concludes, it is impossible to decide rationally in situations involving personally transformative experiences (Paul 2014, 63; 83; 117). It is important to note, however, that Paul offers a solution to this problem. She maintains that, instead of making a choice based on an evaluation of possible outcomes against the backdrop of one's current (first-order) preferences we can choose to discover how one changes as an outcome of a transformative experience (Paul 2014, 119). This decision may thus be qualified as a second-order decision.<sup>5</sup>

I will sidestep this problem related to normative decision theory. Rather, I will focus on the perspective of an agent who faces a personally transformative experience and relates to her future self.<sup>6</sup> How might an agent think about her future self prior to such an experience? What can one expect in view of one's future self? Someone might object that this question misses the point for it seems to misconceive the very idea of transformative experiences as Paul defines them: the main property of transformative experiences is, according to Paul, precisely that prior to having them one cannot know

<sup>5</sup> This so-called "revelation approach" is criticized by, for instance, McQueen (2017) for being incomplete. He presents a further account of rational deliberation that focuses on what he calls "practical identity" - in order to do justice to the ethical dimension: in making a transformative decision one should take into account what kind of person one is, i.e. one should reflect upon one's endorsed values, preferences and commitments regardless of how one will change. This enables one to justify one's decision towards others, which seems to be all the more important since important decisions often also affect others and not only oneself.

<sup>6</sup> This way of phrasing the issue may be considered problematic for it does not seem to remain neutral on the question of how a pre-decision self relates to a post-decision self. It seems to already presuppose that a person persists through transformative experiences. It would therefore be more precise to say: at issue is the perspective of an agent who faces a personally transformative experience and relates to a future person who may or may not be herself.

what they are like and how they impact one's life or change oneself. Consequently, a subject will be unable to have any precise expectation concerning her future self. This is certainly true. However, it seems that even according to Paul's definition prior to a transformative experience one can still relate to *something* concerning the future self: one can expect that - in a generic way - a transformation of oneself is going to happen at  $t_2$ . As Paul points out, one may become a 'new person' having a subjective perspective different from before. So it seems that a person can at least expect a change, namely in terms of "what it is like for you to be you", "your point of view" and "the kind of person you are" as an outcome of transformative experiences (Paul 2014, 16) even though she won't know the quality of the change.<sup>7</sup>

This is supported by Paul's suggestion how to solve the problem outlined above concerning normative decision theory. For Paul holds that we can nevertheless make a rational choice in such situations even though we may be unable to anticipate the way we change. We can yet "choose to discover a new identity" (Paul 2014, 119). Again, my intention here is not to discuss Paul's solution to the problem. Rather, I am interested in what Paul has to say about a person's change as an outcome of a transformative experience and what a person might expect concerning her future self. So the questions I would like to address are: what kind of change of person is at stake? Does Paul want to claim that transformative experiences change a person to the point that she becomes a completely different person? What is the nature and scope of this personal transformation?<sup>8</sup> It is no coincidence that Paul uses the term "identity" in the context of personally transformative experiences even if not in a systematic manner. For instance, in the case of deciding to become a biological parent for the first time, Paul asks: "Once you have a child, will you care less about your career or your education? Will your professional work still define your identity?" (Paul 2014, 81) And further down she stresses: "There are obvious personal identity questions in the background for the pre-experience self who is choosing to become the post-experience self" (ibid., footnote 8).

In order to give an answer to the questions above I will in the next section introduce a distinction between two notions of identity. I will show in what way these two notions can be meaningfully related to Paul's argument and how this helps to clarify the kind of personal change as an outcome of transformative experiences.

### 3 Different notions of "identity"

The term "personally transformative experiences" implies that a person going through these experiences will - in a future scenario - significantly change, i.e. transform. That is, some defining property of an individual person will alter as a consequence of these experiences. The changes concern the identity of a person, as Paul points out (Paul 2014, 81, footnote 8). However, the term "identity" in relation to the concept of a

<sup>7</sup> For the sake of the argument I am assuming here that Paul's strong definition and the epistemic ignorance implied in the concept of transformative experiences is correct. As will become more clear, this helps to get a grip on the kind of personal change meant by Paul.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the term "transformative" is ambiguous for it leaves open whether the thing that is subject to a transformation becomes an entirely different thing or rather only changes significantly while remaining the same.

person is notoriously unclear. It is nevertheless often used in philosophical or interdisciplinary debates on the nature of persons and their self-understanding, which is, more generally, also the context of Paul's notion of personally transformative experiences. In such debates it is seldom made explicit how exactly we are to understand the term "identity". This can have problematic consequences. For the term is sometimes used equivocally, that is, two distinct meanings are not properly or only insufficiently distinguished from one another. I will argue that this distinction also helps to better understand what Paul actually means when she claims that certain experiences *transform* a person, that is, his or her future self.

(1) *P-identity*: The first meaning of the term "identity" is the dominant one in everyday speech. Here the expression is typically used to refer to the personality or the core personality of a person: what 'makes up' a person, distinguishes them from others, is their "identity". This identity can be threatened, one can find oneself in an identity crisis, it is possible to lose one's identity or find it again. This is how we may talk in everyday life. Here the semantic field of "personality" is relevant. If someone says: "Peter is bright and honest" – then they mean that the properties <bright> and <honest> characterize Peter as a person, that in this sense they constitute his "identity". This meaning of "identity" is relevant to, for instance, certain so-called narrative approaches to personhood, particularly when the respective approaches speak of "narrative identity" or the "constitution of identity".<sup>9</sup> It is typically related to certain basic questions: one may, for instance, ask for individual and social conditions of the formation of a personality and emerging cognitive abilities required for an understanding as an individual person (e.g., Nelson 2003); one may moreover ask for the role of having and enacting a life story and look for narrative structures of experiences (e.g., MacIntyre 1981; Schechtman 1996; Ricœur 1992); one may look at the interplay of stability and change in one's life and one's personality (especially Ricœur 1992). It is important to note that "identity" in this sense has the role of a (complex) property. This is apparent in linguistic constructions, such as in predicative attributions of "identity", for instance, when we say that a person has lost or found his or her identity.

Crucially, this underlying concept of identity has to be distinguished from another entirely different concept of identity.

(2) *N-identity*: For the expression "identity" also refers to a logical relation between entities, such as those existing between two different points in time. The relevant question here is: are entities at two different points in time one and the same entity – numerically *one* – or two different ones? If we ask whether Peter, who we run into on the street, is the same – identical – Peter who we went to school with many years ago, then we are using the concept of identity in a different sense than that just described: in the sense of numerical identity (through time).<sup>10</sup> In this case – unlike in the P-identity case – "identity" does not have the role of a property; rather, it is used as a two-digit-relational term – X is "identical" to Y – in order to correctly capture the meaning of N-identity.

<sup>9</sup> The meaning of identity just outlined seems to echo what Ricœur means by "*ipse*-identity": the term refers to "selfhood" and is linked to the question "Who am I?" (Ricœur 1992, 121–122).

<sup>10</sup> This corresponds to Ricœur's notion of "*idem*-identity", by which he means something that stays the same through time, which resists change and can be identified and reidentified at different times (Ricœur 1992, 121–122); this suggests that Ricœur is also dealing with the metaphysical question of persistence. He moreover assumes a dialectic between *ipse*- and *idem*-identity which is mediated by self-narrative.

Now it is important to note that precisely this concept of identity (N-identity) underlies metaphysical approaches to personal identity over time (also called “persistence”): these approaches are concerned with the question of what properties are constitutive for person A at  $t_1$  and person B at  $t_2$  to be one and the same person. Is, for instance, the continuity of the living body or rather the continuity of mental properties necessary and sufficient for a person to be the same at different points in time? It is here not the place to discuss the huge amount of respective arguments and theories, for this is not the topic of my paper.<sup>11</sup> I just want to stress the particular methodological frame connected to the metaphysical question of personal identity in the sense of sameness.

It should be obvious that, generally, the semantic distinction between the two concepts of identity along with the different theoretical functions and methodologies should not be blurred. Concerning the present context, I will argue that keeping the two meanings apart helps to understand in what sense certain experiences may be literally transformative to a person. What kind of change must a person expect concerning her future self prior to a transformative experience? Will the change concern her continued existence? This would mean that the person at  $t_1$  and the person at  $t_2$  with a transformative experience between these two points in time are not one and the same person. Here the underlying concept of identity, by which transformative experiences are analyzed, is N-identity. In contrast, the concept of P-identity is used when it is claimed that transformative experiences lead to a change in personality. In the next section, I will discuss Paul’s argument in light of these two concepts. As mentioned above, my objective is to arrive at a better understanding of the kind of change taking place due to personally transformative experiences.

#### 4 Transformative experiences and identity

At first sight, Paul’s description of personally transformative experiences and their consequences for the future self leaves room for both interpretations. This becomes apparent when we look at certain expressions Paul uses. She holds, for instance, that transformative experiences may “change the kind of person that you are” (Paul 2014, 16). According to P- and N-identity, this can mean two different things: related to N-identity, it can mean that the psychological continuity between you at  $t_1$  and your future self at  $t_2$  is somehow disrupted.<sup>12</sup> Being a new kind of person, then, could mean that at  $t_2$  a new person comes into existence.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation may be supported by Paul’s

<sup>11</sup> For an early overview of standard arguments, which are still prevalent in more recent debates, see Noonan 1989. It is important to note that metaphysical approaches only rarely address the problem of sameness in phenomenological first-personal terms. Some exceptions are, for instance, Dainton and Bayne (2005) and Fuchs (2016).

<sup>12</sup> The possibility that personal transformative experiences may affect the persistence of a person may seem odd and counterintuitive right from the start. It should yet be noted that conclusions of this kind can indeed be found in metaphysical debates on the persistence of persons. Marya Schechtman, for instance, argues that persons are not continuous if they are unable to find an empathic access to their former lives (Schechtman 2001). Another example is Galen Strawson’s quite radical view of selves, according to which persons as selves only exist in the form of short-lived transient episodes of experiencing (Strawson 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Note that the present considerations are metaphysical ones. They need to be separated from epistemological considerations concerning the question of how we recognize a person at  $t_2$  as being the same as at  $t_1$ .

statement that “personal identity questions” are relevant “for the pre-experience self who is choosing to become the post-experience self” (ibid., footnote 8). Although Paul is here quite clearly alluding to the notion of N-identity, it should be noted that she is not offering an argument for personal N-identity. So the following considerations go beyond Paul’s actual claim. But we can nevertheless ask what further assumptions would be needed to adequately discuss personal change in terms of N-identity. First, one would have to clarify what, in this context, N-identity precisely consists in. To say that person A at  $t_1$  and person B at  $t_2$  are different persons due to transformative experiences would be uninformative, to say the least. An independent account as to what constitutes the identity of persons at different points in time would thus be required. What are necessary and sufficient conditions for A at  $t_1$  and B at  $t_2$  to be one and the same? To say that A and B are numerically distinct persons cannot be explained by transformative experiences A undergoes between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ . For the concept of transformative experience would then already imply the altering of a person as an outcome of such experience. This explanation would therefore be circular. As said above, Paul is not addressing N-identity explicitly, so it is no surprise that such an independent argument of what constitutes N-identity cannot be found in her book. One can only speculate that the overall alignment of Paul’s thought would be clearly in favor of a psychological criterion of personal identity, which stresses the continuity of beliefs, desires and most notably preferences. According to this criterion, the continuity of beliefs, desires and preferences are necessary and sufficient for persons A at  $t_1$  and B at  $t_2$  to be the same person. But even in the absence of such an argument we can nevertheless ask to what extent it may be appropriate *in principle* to apply the concept of N-identity to transformative experiences and the future self. So let’s assume for the sake of the argument that the criterion of psychological continuity has been established and that psychological continuity (continuity of beliefs, desire, preferences etc.) has been shown to be necessary and sufficient for the persistence of a person. Is it really plausible that a transformative experience like having a child for the first time causes a clear discontinuity of beliefs, desires and preferences such that a new person comes into existence at  $t_2$ ? I find this conclusion unconvincing. It clearly contradicts everyday intuitions about the persistence of persons. If we imagine a person who at  $t_2$  just went through a strong transformative experience it seems plausible that she would still refer to herself at  $t_1$  in a first-person mode. She would very likely say something along these lines: “Before I gave birth I didn’t know how this experience would change the way I see certain things now.” Relevant here is the multiple mention of “I” by which the speaker refers to herself at different points in time. This reflects the in my view correct intuition that the persistence of persons is not threatened by transformative experiences. So one can conclude from the above reflections that N-identity is not involved in transformative experiences.

Now what about P-identity, which, in the previous section, has been defined as the core personality of a person? How may transformative decisions impact the future self in terms of P-identity? In the remainder of this article I will argue that what is at stake in the context of personally transformative experiences is the particular self-understanding of a person. Even though Paul does not address the self-understanding of persons directly, I will show that it complies nicely with the overall idea of personally transformative experiences. The concept of self-understanding of persons I will make use of captures the notion of P-identity: persons characterize themselves as individuals



and thereby ascribe certain character traits to themselves (e.g. the property of being shy or impatient or generous). Often they explain, illustrate or justify these self-ascriptions by recalling to themselves or other persons selected episodes of their lives or generic autobiographical memories (see especially Crone 2020). The way persons view themselves and are viewed by others is moreover informed by sets of values they endorse, which are manifest in their behavior. To be clear, the self-understanding is typically not present in the form of a distinctive and explicit self-representation; it is rather a form of background awareness in a dispositional mode, which may become explicit in certain situations. For instance, one would be in a position to give meaningful answers to questions about the kind of person one is and the kind of things that are important to oneself. The self-understanding thus described remains fairly stable across time, nevertheless it is vulnerable to change. So it seems plausible that personally transformative experiences of the kind Paul discusses impact or alter one's self-understanding in a particular way. Becoming a biological parent for the first time will likely change some of one's beliefs, desires and what one cares about. Due to this, one may, for instance, change one's habits: one may no longer go out three times a week, one may work less, one may be more careful about one's health and care about others in a different way. Everyday choices will be prioritized differently compared to previous childfree times. Such an overall change will gradually become part of a revised self-understanding. One starts to view oneself and will be progressively viewed by others as a person with different kinds of traits. For instance, one is no longer the person one used to be, say, the go-getting person who never makes binding plans but rather a humble, reliable and maybe also a bit boring person. This sort of change over the span of a lifetime is characteristic for persons' self-understanding. It is well accounted for by, for instance, narrative theories of the self (e.g., MacIntyre 1981; Schechtman 1996; Bruner 1990; Rudd 2012). According to these approaches, one gets a sense of the kind of person one is by representing one's life as a coherent life story, as a so-called self-narrative. Changes like the ones mentioned above may be integrated into such a self-narrative and be considered, if significant, as turning points. Note, however, that the self-understanding cannot be reduced to a self-narrative, that is, it is implausible to assume that it is entirely narrative in structure. For instance, to stick with the example above, to be able to conceive of changes in one's life - even of significant ones - one has to have an implicit awareness of persisting as one agent across time.<sup>14</sup> Otherwise one wouldn't be able to ascribe different experiences and properties to oneself at different points in time. This suggests that the self-understanding is grounded in more basic and non-narrative forms of self-awareness, which may be characterized as a minimal awareness of self-identity over time (Crone 2020).

That the self-understanding is at issue in personally transformative experiences is supported by Paul's claims by which she emphasizes the relation of a person's point of view and her preferences. According to Paul, a transformative experience may "change you enough to substantially change your point of view, thus substantially revising your core preferences" (Paul 2014, 16). The revision of core preferences means, as far as I understand it, that, as a result of a transformative experience, a person changes what she

<sup>14</sup> Note that this description doesn't commit one to any metaphysical claim about the persistence of persons (in the sense of N-identity). Identifying certain structural features of a mode of consciousness (as in the present case) has to be distinguished from establishing certain features as criteria for the persistence.

most cares about, that is, what she believes to be important and what she desires. “Your preferences will change. The way you live your life will change. What and who you care about will change.” (Paul 2014, 81) This will shape your everyday decisions, it will inform your practical reasons and allow you to prioritize your decisions. The alleged substantial change of the point of view connects the revision of core preferences to the self-understanding as described above. The point of view in question is a mental relation not only to the world but also to oneself. Revising one’s point of view, then, also means revising the way one views oneself as a person and “revising how you experience being yourself” (Paul 2014, 16). Changing one’s preferences, which over time repeatedly express themselves in one’s behavior, impacts the way we understand ourselves - as well as how others understand us.<sup>15</sup> We may notice at some point that we have become a different person - in the sense of P-identity and not N-identity. This change may coherently be explained by a transformative experience one has gone through. Importantly, the analysis offered here can also make a case for what someone needs to be prepared for when facing a transformative experience; and this connects well with Paul’s solution to the problem of rational choice outlined above: a person not only has to be prepared to more or less gradually alter her self-understanding in the described way. She can also actively choose to alter her self-understanding, or in Paul’s terms: to become a new kind of person. More generally, I hope to have shown that linking personally transformative experiences to the self-understanding of persons allows to better understand in what sense personally transformative experiences are, in accordance with Paul’s argument, indeed transformative.

It is important to note, however, that in my analysis I have used the words “change”, “altering” and “transformation” (of the self-understanding of persons) somewhat interchangeably. This is of course open to criticism. To say that someone’s self-understanding is subject to a *transformation* may be a stronger claim than to say that it is subject to *change*. For example, the experience of having a child might change me in certain respects: as pointed out before, I may care less for certain things than I used to and more for others I to date was indifferent to. But in other important respects nothing may have changed for me: for instance, I still hold the same political and moral beliefs. In my view we would be careful to call this a “transformation”. The reason is that our self-understanding is sensitive to these kinds of changes and we are able to integrate them more or less well. Without going into details, however, it seems therefore likely that “transformation”, as a consequence of a transformative experience, applies to far less cases than Paul assumes. Her own fictitious example of becoming a vampire seems yet to be one clear candidate. A further example is probably a radical change due to, for example, a gender transition.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly the role the social environment plays for the way persons experience or understand themselves, is not addressed by Paul. An account of how the perspective of other persons is constitutive for the self-understanding can be found in some narrative approaches to the self (e.g., MacIntyre 1981; Schechtman 1996).

<sup>16</sup> See McKinnon (2015) for a detailed and interesting discussion of gender transition as a transformative experience. I think it is important to note, however, that the term “transformation” may be rejected by a person who has undergone gender transition herself. The experience of gender transition may instead be more correctly described as an experience of *disclosure* (rather than a *transformative* experience) - given that it uncovers what already was there (the other gender).

Overall, the above considerations suggest that we need more fine grained semantic tools in order to make further interesting distinctions and, for example, to account for outcomes that are transformative in a strong sense, but also for those with more or less changing effects.

## 5 Conclusion

The central concern of this article was to analyze the relation between transformative experiences and personal identity. Paul's notion of personally transformative experiences raised the question in what sense a person may indeed be subject to a substantial change. An answer to this question, as was argued, has far reaching consequences. What can an agent, before undergoing a transformative experience, expect to happen concerning herself as a person in a future situation - even when she chooses to become a new kind of person, as Paul suggests? Will the continuity between the pre-experience and the post-experience self be preserved? Or will some of her core traits be subject to a change - and if so to what extent? Two different notions of "identity" were distinguished (N- and P-identity) and applied to Paul's argument. It was argued that, for conceptual reasons, personally transformative experiences do not impact the persistence of persons in the sense of N-identity. They do however affect and alter the self-understanding of persons in the sense of P-identity. The concept of a self-understanding of persons was introduced in order to shed some light on the kind of change persons are subject to due to personally transformative experiences. As Paul remains rather vague on this issue, the overall conclusion for discussions on transformative experiences is that a fine-grained and structural account of the way how persons conceive of themselves helps to understand what actually is at issue: in what way persons change as an outcome of life decisions in which personally transformative experiences are involved.

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