

Transformative Experiences and Personal Identity

Clifford Bakalian

2018

There is something fascinating about aging, about moving through time and about getting older. The amount of change which happens in a person's life is astonishing and the realization that each person has changed just as much as you can be shocking. Writer John Koenig coined a term "sonder" which is "the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own." It is this shocking feeling which has caused me to be interested in personal identity and how one's identity is created. I want to focus on events which shape our identity, events we believe to be important, specifically conscious decisions we make in regards to transformative experiences. In her book *Transformative Experience*, Paul focuses on transformative experiences which cause both a personal and epistemic change. I am only focused on the former. There seem to be three types of these transformative experiences: those which change how one would view the world, those which change how one would view themselves and those that change how one would view both the world and themselves. The change of personal identity focuses primarily on the second type, however I will also take into account types of the third. The important part of transformative experiences is the sense of finality of the situation. This is the concept that once the experience has taken place, there is no going back to a time before. I want to modify or at least quantify this however with the words "consenting" and "conscious". The word "consenting" is quite important here because there can be many different types of transformative experiences which are not entirely up to a person. While these transformative experiences can be impactful on personal identity, I want to examine the transformative experiences which we do have in our control. The second word "conscious" is used to describe

transformative events that we believe will be transformative. These events usually include long contemplation, or at the very least, significant thought beforehand. There can be examples of consenting transformative events without consciousness and there can exist examples of conscious transformative events without the aspect of consent. One can choose to go to a rock concert for the first time believing that it will not change how they see themselves or the world, only for it to affect them years later. One could be the victim of a sexual assault and be aware such an event will change them, but definitely not consent to it. I argue the experiences involving both consent and consciousness are more impactful on personal identity because we have a choice in these matters to change ourselves if we so desire it. This is based upon two reasons. First, the process of contemplating and making a choice leading towards the transformative experience can by itself be quite impactful to identity. Second, after the transformative experience has occurred, or the choice has been made, we must accept the consequences because it would ultimately be our fault for the choice chosen. This would be due to the fact that having the responsibility of any fallout from the choice was granted in the decision step. In order to discuss the introspection and the personal identity crisis one has after the transformative experience I will first discuss about how one's personal identity can be affected through the process known as decision making when it comes to conscious consenting transformative experiences.

How someone sees themselves seems very important and it appears morally wrong to deny someone the ability to self identity. Many human and civil rights movements are about this. Human rights movements usually revolve around one group who refuses to allow another group to identify the same way as them. Whites saw themselves as humans and believed blacks could not identify as such. Civil rights usually revolve around one group who refuses to allow others to identify differently than them. Members of the LGBTQ community are shunned by some because they refuse to identify as heterosexual or be cis-normal. These issues revolve around the discrepancy between the way someone sees themselves, and how others see them. W.E.B du Bois discusses this phenomenon of "double consciousness" in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. While both sides can drastically impact one's identity, personal identity is more concerned with how one views themselves rather than how others view them. In essence, we value how we value ourselves. Moving forward I will define personal identity as the collection of labels and views

we attribute to ourselves regardless of what other people say. It is as if there is this running narrative in our head that we tell ourselves independently of the narrative told to us by others. Due to how intimate this self narrative is, it would seem how we decide to define ourselves has the potential to be much stronger than how others perceive us. That is not to say it is always stronger, but it has the potential to be. There is a small caveat however: there must be truth to this narrative. A mass murderer cannot ignore the fact he has killed in order for his identity as an honest man to be true. He would have to qualify the fact he is an honest man regardless that he is also a killer. Either way, this identity we hold has a large connection with our life.

Our life and our identity are heavily intertwined. As our life changes, so does our identity, and as our identity changes, so does our life. There are events which can have a lasting effects on our lives whether we are aware of them or not. Some of these events just happen while others are thought out and carefully chosen. Some of the events which are out of our control, such as severe traumatic events, can have severe impacts on how we see ourselves. These events however do not seem genuine to us, but rather seems more like things forced upon our identity. The events which we can choose for ourselves however can reflect changes we wish to see on our personal identity, or our perception of reality. Making a transformative choice takes time and much thought. There must also be a certain type of motivation existing to allow a person to even consider choices related to transformative experiences. This motivation seems very much connected to changes of something. There must be something we recognize about ourselves we wish to change, or at least something about ourself we consider changing. If someone was completely fine with their personal identity, and did not wish to change who they were for any reason, it should follow they would have no hesitation when making transformative choices. Yet one will rarely find someone this accepting and comfortable of their identity. So this leads us to the question of figuring out which part of ourself we want changed. Let us take the example of being offered to be transformed to a vampire. For most, the transformation from human to vampire would change how they saw themselves. If someone accepted this offer, it would seem logical they understood that part of their personal identity was to change. It is possible to fathom at least two reasons why someone would reject vampire-hood. The person either feels comfortable with themself and does not want to change their identity or they know or at least desire to change their identity, yet does not believe that vampirehood

would solve this identity crisis. Inspecting the former option, it would appear that this person would not want to forgo any type of transformative experience because there is no desire for change, either of themselves or of their worldview. While it seems plausible that the former types of people exist, they would seem dreadfully boring. Those that want to change themselves however, may not even know what about themselves they wish to change, but know that they do not wish to continue as they currently are.

Consider the thoughts that goes through one's mind when contemplating important life decisions. They may be similar to "Why am I doing this", "What are the benefits/detriments", and "Is this what I really want?" Each of these questions are important in their own right but there seems to be something connecting them to each other. "Why am I doing this" becomes "What do I want out of this?" "What are the benefits/detriments" can be rephrased to "What do I believe I will gain and lose from this decision?" "Is this what I really want" is transformed to "Am I okay with where I am now?" These modified questions seem to ask a lot about what changes someone wants to see in their life. In the sense of conscious consenting transformative choices, we can pose the question "Is there anything I want to change about myself and if so, what do I want to change it to?" A follow up question would be asking how one could achieve the change. There may not be an answer to these questions but the easiest to answer would be the first part of the main question, given that the agent has time to introspect. This search of what we want to change about ourselves can be impactful to our identity and be considered a transformative experience in and of itself. For it is in this process which we begin to start contemplating what parts of ourselves we value and which parts of ourselves do we devalue. It does not seem blatantly obvious this is what we are doing when we contemplate our choices, nor would I say many people even realize they go through this process to begin with. Yet, this does not mean we do not go through a process where we compare our current situation to a potential future one. We seem to do this all the time in daily tasks such as deciding when to make dinner or deciding how many times we can hit the snooze button. The only difference these examples are from contemplating a transformative offer is that instead of comparing situations and other external qualia, we are comparing our current identity with one which we believe we may end up with.

When we project ourselves into the future, there seems to always be im-

plicit bias on this action. The previous sentence even says the bias for the action performed: we project ourselves. We project ourselves implies that we take our current self and place them in a situation where the projected consequences of our action describes the state of the world. Is this not what we are doing? When applying to college, do we think in terms of what our future self will like and value, or do we think only in terms of what the current manifestation of us likes and values? Rarely does it seem that we take into account how our future self will see the state of their world. Either way, when this comparison takes place, there is a lot mental time travel. Reintroducing the qualifier of “conscious” is significant here. The only reason we project ourselves in these situations is because we, the agent, believe this choice will lead to a transformative experience. It would seem absurd to project ourselves into the future for long if at all, if we did not anticipate some sort significant change. Say one had a green or a blue marker to choose from when writing a small note to oneself. It is highly unlikely the agent would be thinking about their future self caring about the color of the note. It is only when we anticipate a transformative experience do we think in the terms of the future in comparison to the present. This could perhaps be the case because projection is costly. The more times we throw ourselves into the future and the more we times bring ourselves back, it seems the current perception of oneself gets more and more defined. It is for this reason why it seems possible that even without making a decision, just contemplating a transformative choice could be transformative. In one of my classes about self-knowledge, it was mentioned that this phenomena of making choices and thinking too long can affect the situation. The claim is that we can sometimes lose sense of our current self if we over think these decisions for too long. It no longer becomes the comparison between my current self and future self, but rather my past self and my future self. This is not to say the bias is detrimental to the decision process. While it certainly can be, we are still comparing two things to each other. This can create expectations. Expectations of who or what we will be in the future. We make these expectations by comparing the current self in the current situations with whatever notion of self that we project into the future situation. These expectations become very important after the choice has been made.

So far I have been discussing the events and processes leading up to a conscious consenting personal transformative experience. What happens during or after the transformative experience? If the transformative experience is

consenting and conscious, it would seem that there is only one thing to do: to get through it, to gain the experience. Paul is right that there is a major epistemological gap that exists when we try to predict the state of the world before we have made a transformative choice. It is only during or after the experience does this epistemological gap close. This would seem to imply that during the transformative experience, all you are doing is experiencing the event, or gaining this knowledge. Regardless I believe the actual event itself is not so transformative in terms of personal identity but it is the actions that occur afterward that make it so.

We go into these transformative experiences with expectations of how the event will change us and we come out with a conclusion about ourselves. It is my observation that there is only two ways these post-experience evaluations of expectations could go. The experience either met your expectations or they did not. Due to the epistemological gap and also the randomness of reality, it would seem that most events fall into the latter category in the sense that expectations were not met. There are two ways an expectation could not be met. The first is that one expected one thing which did not happen. The second is that one did not expect something to happen and then it occurred. It is unclear if one of these is more impactful on personal identity, yet it seems that there is a different impact on identity when one's expectations did not match up with reality, compared to when the expectations were met. In order to make this assessment we must look into one of the main factors which goes into this post-experience introspection: memory.

Memory is a very fickle thing and can be quite unreliable yet it is one of the main components which goes into introspection. We can go through the experience waiting for our expectations to be met. As mentioned in a discussion, a man could be at the hospital with his wife as she goes through childbirth and is waiting for the "you're now a father" feeling. We only know if this feeling does not happen by the time the experience is over. Hence it would seem how we remember the event is crucial when introspecting and interpreting the event. It would also seem that the act of remembering or the memory itself is transformative. Say when you were 10, you went to your first rock concert and thought nothing of it at the time. That event was not transformative to you then. Yet now that you have been to a couple more concerts, and have aged and perhaps had your value system changed, remembering that rock concert could be transformative. Some events which

are lacking the conscious quantifier tend to be like this. There is some event which happened years ago which was so unimportant then, but rather have much more relevance now. It also would seem that should one not remember a transformative event that it would not affect one's personal identity. Our identity and value system themselves seem to be based upon our memories of certain events (if we forgot that in grade school a friend spilled a terribly important secret then we may be a more trusting human being if we had remembered). This unfortunately has a poor implication on our value system and transformative experiences. Our memory can be highly unreliable. We can "remember" events which have never happened. We can not remember other more important events. We can remember incorrect things, or have our brain fill in things which did not actually happen in the cases where we mix reality with fiction. This would mean transformative experiences and consequently values related to personal identity, which are centered around a specific point in time, are highly volatile. Should we find out that our memory of such an event be wrong, our identity, could be drastically impacted. Yet, there is a part of this where even if we were guaranteed a perfect memory that a transformative experience could later change the impact on our identity.

The most important part of a transformative experience is the part which occurs after the event itself had happened. This is the time of introspection and looking back upon the transformative experience. This is when we analyze the current situation of the world and compare it to the expectations we has earlier set up. This is where the true transformation of our personal identity begins. Personal identity is based upon who and what you see yourself as. This would mean that personal identity would have to be conscious in order for it to valid. Of course there are times which one could be mistaken or at least in denial about their personal identity. I will discuss this idea later, although regardless of conscious or unconscious attention we have towards our identity, when a transformative choice has been made, consequences will occur. These consequences are either a change in the world or oneself. In conscious transformative experiences, we usually are looking for those latter consequences. We want to know if we made the right choice, if we made a good choice. We usually evaluate those things based on the consequences of the actions we took. These consequences are then compared to the state of the universe before the transformative experience and also compared to our expectations we made going into the transformative expe-

rience. Assuming we remember the event correctly allows us to focus only on the change we perceived to have happened. Sometimes too much change has occurred, we overpredicted, sometimes not enough change has occurred, we underpredicted, or the amount of change matched our expected change value. The expectation vs reality phenomena has been shown to impact how we view the experience, or at least in terms of pain. I do not see why we could not extend it to other aspects which we consider when we think of transformative properties. Due to these expectations being formed before the transformative experience, the perceived change which is reflected upon would seem more drastic than had the expectations been created after the transformative experience. It is for this main reason it would seem conscious and consenting transformative experiences are more impactful on personal identity rather than transformative experiences which are not conscious nor consenting.

In times where our expectation matches reality, we may be aware that our identity has changed. If we take Paul's example of becoming a vampire, we may have expectations of what vampire life would be like. If our expectations match the reality of us being a vampire, then it would seem that our experience was transformative. The interesting times is when our expectation does not match reality. In these cases there is an epistemic gap between what the past self knew and what the future self would be. A colleague of mine discussed that when his wife was having his first son, he was expecting and waiting for the time that he felt like a father. He claims this time never came and that even now, years later, there are times it does not seem so. This is intriguing because one would think having a child would be a transformative experience (perhaps more for females than males). I think this lack of perceived "transformative" experience is due to two reasons. The first is that this was an overprediction. The second because becoming a father is not an instant change but rather it seems more likely to be a change which takes place over a long period of time. Overpredictions most likely cause this idea of no transformation because the agent places a threshold at what constitutes a transformation. This occurs during the expectation creation phase and when that threshold is not met, then the agent concludes that a transformative experience had not occurred. I argue that a transformative experience has occurred here but the agent is ignorant of it. In the case of "becoming a father" the ignorance is probably also enforced by the length of time knowing you are expecting a child and actually having the child. The transformative

experience is not the moment when the baby is delivered, but perhaps the time during the nine months where the agent is consciously expecting a child. I could imagine a situation where a father is unaware he has sired a child and learning that he will be a father as mother is giving birth. My intuition says the father would go through the transformative phrase either once he is told the news, or as soon as he has proof that a child was created. I believe it would be at one of these two times that the agent's personal identity goes from "not a father" to "father." Of course, there are terrible times a father could abandon his child and its mother. I would say this agent is still a father, he has fathered a child, but he is not the "dad." The person who abandons their child is still a mother or father, they went through the steps to create a living being, but they are not the abstract notions of "mum" or "dad." All these special cases involve some sort of denial on part of the agent.

Earlier I defined personal identity as how one person views themselves. That the narrative they tell themselves is who they are. This included the mention that there must be truth in this narrative for the identity to be genuine. In cases of ignorance, this merely means that the narrative is incomplete from the agents point of view. I do not believe ignorance impacts self identity. It is only when an ignorance is enlightened and the missing parts are filled in, does the piece become part of the non-ignorant point of view. A man who has no idea that someone is carrying his child, then it would seem absurd to believe he had gone through a transformative experience. The time where issues with the narrative impact personal identity are times where the agent is denying parts of their narrative (ie, the element of truth is not present in personal identity). A person who has fathered a child and then abandoned them, is still a father, but not a "dad." If this person does not identify as a someone who sired a child, it would appear that he is either ignorant of what a father is, or he is lying to himself about the narrative that is his life. In both these cases, their identity is not changed, yet in the latter case, personal identity seems compromised. On the other hand, if the person acknowledges they are a father, yet can never be "dad" to the child, their identity has changed and despite the morality of such a choice, their personal identity still seems uncorrupted. This would imply that transformative experiences can impact our identity, even if we decide to not focus on that part of our narrative. The man who abandons his child can go through his life telling himself and others that he is no "dad" or even further, he is no father, yet for his personal identity to remain genuine, he must accept that his has fathered

a child. A valid personal identity statement he could claim is “I am not a father despite the fact that I have sired a child” while an invalid claim would be “I am not a father.” The man could decide to not let that experience impact his identity too much, but the experience and the acknowledgement of it must still exist. Note here that this makes the assumption that the man is currently aware of the fact. We said that had the man not know initially, that the personal identity statement is affected by ignorance. It is the same ignorance should the man have an accident which resulted in amnesia. If the man did not remember such an event happen, then how could one hold him responsible for being ignorant? A special case which would require more thought would be if the man had repressed or ignored the reality of the situation that he simply forgot the event had even happened to begin with. Would this be the fault of the agent, or would it be the fault of memory’s inherent property of being unreliable? While intuition may state that it is the fault of both, there seems to be no rational explanation which could answer this question. However, regardless of ignorance or denial it would seem that had these expectations not been made pre-experience, one’s identity would not have changed as drastically.

The only time these expectations would not have been made beforehand was if the transformative experience was not consenting or conscious. In a non-consenting transformative experience, it would appear that the transformative experience is shoved upon you and you have no other option but to get through it. An example of this would be surviving a traumatic event like a mass shooting. In this case, one has no time to create expectations. A non-conscious transformative experience is one which the agent does not expect the event to be transformative. An example discussed in class would be choosing to go zip-lining but not anticipating it would change something about the agent. In these cases the agent does not expect to need expectations so they do not formulate them. If one does not have expectations made before hand, when the introspective phrase starts, it would mean the agent has to project themselves back in time to before the event. Much like how there was an epistemic gap projecting oneself forward in time, there is a similar gap when projecting oneself back in time, however not as drastic. A transformative event is one where once it has occurred, you cannot go back to the way things were. My aforementioned colleague describes that he cannot envision, or at least has trouble envisioning a time his wife and kids were not part of his life. It would make sense that it would be difficult

to accurately project oneself to a mindset before the event. In this case we make expectations of what we believed the past self would have made and align them with the current world. While the introspection phrase here is useful and can have an impact on identity, I argue that the expectations one made post-event are not as accurate as expectations that would have been made pre-event. In this case the change of expectation for consenting and conscious transformative experiences are more drastic and hence more accurate for ones which are not consenting or conscious. This would seem to imply the impact on personal identity is also diminished by non-conscious and non-consenting transformative experiences.

There may be some argument that non-consenting transformative experiences have the potential to be more impactful than consenting transformative experiences. One such example is where one finds himself shoved into an unknown experience yet knows it will be transformative and has time to create expectations. Such an example could be you are on a train on your way to Philadelphia and the conductor tells you on the loudspeaker that the next station is being held up by a terrorist organization. The conductor also claims that when they arrive, you should be prepared to hand over valuables and that you may be taken as a hostage. I doubt the agent wishes to be partake in the upcoming events, yet they cannot get off the train and so they have to face the inevitable attack that will take place. It would seem that in this case, surviving the encounter, that the person's identity could have drastically changed, perhaps even on part had this event been consenting. Perhaps this is correct, that one's identity changes here the same way had it been consenting or non consenting. There only seems to be one response to this argument: responsibility.

When someone is given a choice between two things, and they are allowed to make a free choice, a choice away from coercion or deception. It would seem that they are responsible and the one to blame for the consequences of their action. If a person was not given a choice, and had to do something terrible, it seems intuitive that they are not at fault. This same idea applies to personal identity. In non-consenting transformative experiences, the person may have to go through a transformative experience, and while it may be quite traumatic, the agent knows they are not given a choice so the consequences are out of their control. I am not arguing that all consenting transformative experiences are more transformative than non-consenting ex-

periences. I am arguing that if we present an agent with a situation, where the only difference is the ability to consent, the consenting event is more impactful. Let's take the previous example of the terrorist attack and train passenger. Had the passenger been given the choice, and the passenger agreed to the terrorist attack, I believe the passenger would have been transformed more drastically than had they not been given the choice in this matter. In consenting transformative experiences, the agent knows they are at fault for whatever happens. I argue that when one is responsible for their actions, it makes them closer and more valuing of the consequences. Whereas, if something is out of our control, we can distance ourselves better from the situation and not be as affected by the consequences. This perception of fault however is subjective. It does not matter if the agent is actually at fault or not, but what the agent perceives to be the truth. This phenomenon can be seen in soldiers who suffer from survivor's guilt. While they may not be the ones responsible for the death of their comrade, they certainly believe they are and their identity changes to that from bystander, to murderer. This example would imply that if we believe ourselves to be responsible for our actions, our personal identity is impacted more harshly than if we believed that we were not responsible. In the fact that our personal identity should be true, there should be no ignorance or denial about responsibility, that we actually hold. There could be ignorance or denial about events we are not actually responsible for, but feel that we are. However, like when we are ignorant or in denial about events that happened, our personal identity feels corrupted if we are lying or not telling ourselves the truth.

While there are probably many more objections one could make, there is no denying the impact transformative experiences have on identity. As we go through the very long and unavoidable transformative experience that is known as life and aging, our personal identity changes. These changes can reflect the choices we made in our life as it is our choices which can set us apart from others. Being aware or at least conscious of how our choices can affect our identity is important to help us better understand ourselves. The more we are aware and knowledgeable about ourselves may help us make better decisions in the future. We need to accept this narrative that exists in our life and examine it so we are not ignorant about ourselves, or our life. We also want to keep this narrative in tact and genuine which means we cannot be in denial about certain aspects of our existence. To conclude, it seems fair to think that when we are confronted with a transformative experience, we

should prefer to have a choice in the matter and be aware that such an event is happening. It is quite reasonable that people want the most control over their own identity and these two factors are heavily important in our creation of self. This is because at the end of the day we have to deal with ourself and accept who we are as a person. The best and easiest way to do this is to have more control over one's identity and understanding how change can affect oneself.