PROFILES

THE PHILOSOPHER L. A. PAUL WANTS US TO THINK ABOUT OUR SELVES

To whom should we have allegiance—the version of ourself making choices, or the version of ourself who will be affected by them?

By Alice Gregory
December 2, 2024

"I have a slightly campy side," Paul, a professor of philosophy at Yale and the author of "Transformative Experience," said. Photograph by Jordan Tiberio for The New Yorker

Listen to this story

00:00 41:46

The Sonoran Desert, which covers much of the southwestern United States, is a vast expanse of arid earth where cartoonish entities—roadrunners, tumbleweeds, telephone-pole-tall succulents—make occasional appearances. It was in this iconic, Looney Tunes landscape that dozens of philosophers gathered in the winter of 2022 at a three-thousand-acre dude ranch on the outskirts of Tucson, Arizona, as if inhabiting a thought experiment of their own design. Between archery practice and lassoing lessons, they met in an adobe structure, where there was talk of "inconsistency relations" and "the concept of entailment." "How does 'probably' work?" was unanimously agreed to be one of the more polarizing questions a person could ask.

They were there to attend the Ranch Metaphysics Workshop, an annual conference conceived of nearly twenty years ago by Laurie Paul, a professor of philosophy at Yale University. Paul is the author of "Transformative Experience," a widely read philosophical investigation of personal change which has been translated into French, Japanese, and Arabic, with German and Mandarin translations in the works. Paul, whose work won the 2020 Lebowitz Prize for philosophical achievement, had selected the ranch for its small dining hall, which she hoped might foster intimate conversation. She wanted the event to combine the rigorous discussion of more typical academic conferences with, as she put it to me, "being kind of nice." It was an attempt, if only for a few days a year, to socially engineer some of the bullying out of a field infamous for an intellectual aggression so intense that reducing an interlocutor to tears was long considered a mark of successful debate.

"You're just doing stuff together, and it's completely separate from the kind of in-your-head activity that philosophy is," Ned Hall, a philosopher at Harvard University who helped Paul with the workshop's early iterations, told me. "You're riding horses! And no one's any good at it!" Equestrian sport: the great equalizer. (The setting was also an inside joke of sorts about the celebrated philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine, who was known for a minimalist world view that he once described as being similar to a "taste for desert landscapes.")

Get *The New Yorker's* daily newsletter

Keep up with everything we offer, plus exclusives available only to newsletter readers, directly in your in-box.

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our User Agreement and Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement. This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.

"I have a slightly campy side," Paul, whose strong, symmetrical features made her choice to dress like John Wayne appear elegant rather than foolish, told me. She gestured behind her to a fire pit. Around it were a dozen or so people, many of whom, at Paul's urging, were also decked out in Western wear. Among them was Ram Neta, a philosopher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who'd been happy to put on a plaid shirt but had drawn the line, earlier in the day, at a cowboy hat—Paul's own—which she had playfully placed atop his head prior to his lecture. "Sorry, I can't do this," he told the audience, before removing the hat and asking—with the aid of an equation scribbled on a whiteboard—"What are opinions?"

Beyond the ranch loomed a hill where, that morning, José Luis Bermúdez, a philosopher from Texas A. & M. University, had given an outdoor lecture featuring allusions to Shakespeare, Erving Goffman, and an alternate-reality Mycenaean king he called Agamemnon-minus. Getting to the top of the hill had taken about an hour on horseback, and, with the exception of a philosopher from U.C.L.A., who spent the ride explaining black holes to a ranch hand, most of the riders had trotted quietly in single file.

Paul's work pushes back against a powerful trend in philosophy, which, as it's practiced today, can at times look more like science than literature. For the past century, one of the field's aims has been to eradicate vagueness and the inconsistencies that arise when we speak and write—to make language more closely resemble arithmetic. The approach, taken up in Vienna in the nineteen-twenties and thirties and eventually exported to America, augmented speculative, descriptive, and semireligious inquiries with formulas and sprawling mathematical proofs. This relentless, sometimes neurotic-seeming pursuit of clarity has had the ironic effect of rendering much of contemporary philosophy nearly indecipherable to outsiders.

At the ranch, as philosophers herded cattle and drank tequila, Paul and I took a walk through a scrubby expanse. The heels of her black cowboy boots, stepping across the soil, created a dust cloud that obscured her feet. Paul explained that, in her field, first-person experience—"squishiness," as she put it—typically goes undiscussed. She, however, thought that it could be handled precisely and rigorously, in the same fashion that her colleagues might talk through how many grains of sand constitute a heap. Paul believes that her discipline's tools can, as she says, "give us a kind of wisdom, and meaning to living," but she is determined that they not obscure the questions to which they are applied. We are meant to admire statues, after all, not the chisels with which they are carved.

"I just feel that experience has a kind of value," Paul said hesitantly, as if she believed herself to be saying something controversial. Philosophy tends to attract people who, she said, "like being detached from ordinary life." A shadow cast by a century-old saguaro cactus flashed across her face. "Whereas I'm totally puzzled and fascinated and disturbed by ordinary life, and I have been since, like, middle school." It had been about ten years since Paul first asked her colleagues—in a discipline that takes for granted the question of what it might be like to be a bat—to consider what it might be like to be a parent.

"Transformative Experience," published, like all her writing, under the name L. A. Paul, and released by Oxford University Press in 2014, was her attempt to examine, in roughly two hundred pages, the special types of situations that change not only what we know but also who we are. These transformative experiences provide new knowledge that previously would have been inaccessible to us, and with that knowledge our preferences, values, and self-conception are fundamentally altered. A religious conversion might be an example of a transformative experience. So might losing a limb or taking LSD or going to war. But it was having a child that gave Paul the idea for the book, and, indeed, having a child became its central, if not always explicit, theme.

The book grew out of a working paper, ultimately titled "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting," that Paul had first presented at a talk two years earlier. In it, she argued that the conventional tools of decision-making do not work when choosing whether to have a child. The "natural approach"—reflecting on what it would be like, appealing to the testimony of other people—was, she argued, insufficient. And no analogous experience (babysitting a niece, say) could ever get you anything but a faulty approximation of the real one. The question of whether to have a child was, for Paul, a sort of riddle that illuminated the limits of rationality. She explored the question through the framework of normative decision theory, whose premise is that we ought to act to maximize expected value, whatever it might be—personal happiness, say, or annual company profits, or a population's average life expectancy. (The idea's most elegant encapsulation is Pascal's wager, which makes the utilitarian case for believing in God: "If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.") But such logic, Paul argues, fails in the face of a transformative experience. Choosing to undergo such an experience, on the occasions when choice is even possible, requires us to violate who we take our current self to be. To whom should we have allegiance—the version of ourself making choices, or the version of ourself affected by those choices?

Paul had been living in Canberra, Australia, on a research fellowship at the Australian National University when she had her first child, in January, 2004. Her due date had been in December—summer there—and she spent the last, very hot few weeks of her pregnancy shuffling around the campus at night, often with her husband, the Irish sociologist Kieran Healy. Paul was reading the books she was supposed to be reading to prepare, but she felt alienated by their "cheery assessments" of what pregnancy was like, and she had the impression that, if anything, the books were lulling her into a false sense of control. Once, she became so frustrated that she hurled one of the volumes across the room. A week passed, and then another. When she finally went into labor, a nurse at the hospital asked if she had brought a mirror. Did she want one, to watch the birth as it happened? "I was, like, 'Um, O.K., sure,' " Paul recalled. "But, before, I had been thinking to myself, No, I'm really not interested in seeing a lot of blood."

Paul said that she had felt like "a medieval machine, a giant wheel cranking and slowly pulling giant heavy doors open." She was overwhelmed, unable to comprehend what was going to happen. When she had imagined the scene, it had always been in the third person. Now she *was* that person. "And they just fundamentally conflict," Paul said. "They're not the same perspective, and there's no way for them to come together." But looking at herself in the mirror giving birth "made the incoherent coherent," she said. "It broke all the regular ways I previously knew how to make sense of myself." (Paul has consistently maintained that physically bearing one's own child, as opposed to adopting one, is not a prerequisite for the epistemic changes that she identifies as most important.)

By the time Paul gave the lecture, in 2012, she was forty-six and had two children in elementary school. "It was pretty amazing to me that philosophers were not talking about this," she recalled. But a righteous sense that her peers were failing to address the experience of having a child did not quell her anxiety about being the one to do so. "This is going to ruin my career," Paul remembers thinking. "It's all going to be over, because here I am talking about *babies*."

But the opposite happened. When a draft of the paper appeared online, in 2013, it was met with extensive coverage, both on academic blogs and on the Web sites of mainstream publications, including this one. In an NPR piece, the psychologist Tania Lombrozo called the paper an "elegant fusion of real life with real philosophy." There were critiques: some philosophers quibbled with the specifics of Paul's decision modelling, others with the solipsism of focussing so much on the expectant parent rather than on the child or the world writ large. But the general response was an enthusiastic desire for Paul to expand her argument. The paper was published in a special issue of *Res Philosophica*, a prominent philosophy quarterly, accompanied by thirteen other papers replying to it.

"Transformative Experience" came out a year later. Like Paul herself, its style is approachable and friendly. The epigraph is a quotation from A. A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh series, and its extended opening thought experiment involves vampires. As is true of most works of academic philosophy, the book can feel repetitive. (Paul considers the repetition necessary and has compared it to examining a cut gemstone—holding it up to the light and turning it slowly to see every all-but-identical facet.) Yet, given the subject matter, the repetition is more poetic than redundant. "For many big life choices, we only learn what we need to know after we've done it, and we change ourselves in the process of doing it," she writes. Paul argues for revelation. She contends that we should make our choices with humility—on the basis of "whether we want to discover who we'll become."

Transformative experience now has its own entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. It has been the subject of a modern-dance performance, an Italian art fair, a multiauthored volume put out by Oxford University Press, and, this past spring, a conference at Yale, featuring prominent academics from across disciplines, including the psychologist Paul Bloom, the cognitive scientist Molly Crockett, and the philosopher Agnes Callard. The conference "revealed her place in the field, intellectually," Callard told me. The notion of transformative experience was an "enduring paradigm shift."

Not everyone is convinced of Paul's argument. Elizabeth Barnes, a philosopher at the University of Virginia, told me that the idea of privileging "the mom version of me" over the version "who is considering bringing her into being" makes her uncomfortable. "I think it's totally rational to preserve your current values!" Barnes said. The British philosopher Richard Pettigrew wrote a rejoinder of a book in which he argued for a complicated system of value ratings that could be averaged together, resulting in a kind of democratic vote between selves. Many questioned how to articulate what, exactly, might count as a transformative experience: for the idea to have value, the classification would have to be quite narrow. But how narrow, and who decides?

Even those who disagree with Paul's approach tend to admire, however grudgingly, its cleverness. "It was very canny," Christopher Meacham, a philosopher at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, told me of Paul's choice to frame the dilemma through decision theory. "It was good branding, good marketing," he added, insisting that he did "not mean that in a derogatory way at all." Most parents, he said, are not "close-reading the happiness studies or throwing up the charts, but we *do* ask ourselves, 'When can we afford to do this? How will having a child change the trajectory of our careers?' " Still, Meacham said that he was not "super convinced" about Paul's formulation.

"If you just summarize Laurie's conclusion, there is a flatness to it," Callard told me. "But that's *all* philosophy. I mean, what does Descartes conclude? That the external world exists! But on the way there he also came up with a bunch of good arguments for why it maybe didn't."

Like Paul's original article, "Transformative Experience" received significant attention in the mainstream press. In the *Times*, David Brooks devoted a column to it, calling Paul's formulation of the dilemma "ingenious." The book made Paul one of a handful of contemporary philosophers whose work is familiar to people outside academia.

Sometime around 2018, I became one of those people. And when I approached Paul about the possibility of a profile, it was in the spirit of self-help. I was thirty-one and obsessed with whether or not I should have a child. The question felt huge and opaque—like one that neither data nor anecdote could solve. I thought about it all the time, though "thinking" is probably too precise a verb. It was more like a constant buzz, scoring the background of daily life in a tone that registered somewhere between urgency and tedium. The bad parts were easy to picture: less sleep, less time, less money. The awesome parts—expelling a new person out of my own body, say—were, quite literally, inconceivable. The dilemma felt impossible, as if I were attempting to convert dollars into the currency of a country that didn't yet exist.

It did not help that every week it seemed that some gifted writer published a book or an anguished piece of first-person writing about the psychological perils of procreation. Having a baby was *brutal*. It was *annihilating*. Its effects were both devastatingly material and mystically vague. These memoirs—sometimes they were essays or "novels"—were collectively spoken of as a new genre of literature, representing an urgent corrective to the rosy, delusional portrayal of motherhood that had apparently come before, of which neither I nor anyone I knew could think of a single serious example. I read these books as I would gossip magazines at the grocery store: quickly and with a frantic, dismissive pleasure.

I found Paul's work, meanwhile, to be therapeutic. It provided exactly the sort of comfort I always sought in moments of anguish: not a solution or advice, or even a description, but the validation that, yes, the problem really was as major and intractable as I thought. I liked (of course I liked) that her academic concerns about the subject were oriented not around climate change or orphans but around, for all intents and purposes, *me*. There was some solace in the knowledge that here was a person trying—as philosophers do, at their best—to lend intellectual credibility to what might otherwise remain private emotional intuitions. The fact that I was unfamiliar with the formal logic that undergirded Paul's work seemed irrelevant.

When we met for the first time, in 2018, it was in Paul's wood-panelled office at Yale, and she indulged my naïve, nontechnical curiosity about her work. I recounted to her my conversations with other people about the issue. "It's always more interesting to do something than not to do it," one friend had argued. "It's the best way to stop thinking about yourself all the time," a friend's mother had said, with a little edge. The chance to fall in love with someone I'd never met—an argument I occasionally made to myself—was appealing, I told Paul, as was the idea, in the words of one nonreligious friend, of "finally knowing what your soul is for." Paul, who had once described such ruminations as "an interesting exercise in imaginative fiction," was gentle in her response.

She reiterated what she had written in her book: the testimony of other people should be regarded with wariness. This struck me as self-evidently correct. I obviously could not trust the guidance of people who did not have children (they didn't have children), but neither could I trust the guidance of people who did have children (they had children!). I rattled off all the other circumstantial reasons that my friends' thoughts on the matter should have no bearing on my own: one had parents who lived nearby; another wasn't interested in having a career; a few were extremely wealthy; two lived in *Berlin*. Why would I listen to them? I left Paul's office embarrassed to have come to her with such commonplace concerns, but also reassured by her affirmation that, yes, I was right to be troubled by them.

Paul dates the origin of her intellectual life to her adolescence, which she spent enduring, as she has said, "the extremely boring suburbs of Chicago" and reading "The Lord of the Rings." Paul, the eldest of three children, described herself as "the second most unpopular person in school." (This was less an attempt at humor than a quantitative analysis: Paul still recalls the name—and the enthusiasms—of the most unpopular person.) Puzzled by her low rank in the social hierarchy, Paul thought, I need to analyze this. Why was she being made fun of? What was she doing wrong?

By the end of this examination, Paul had changed nearly everything about herself: her hair, her clothes, her gait, her gestures. She stopped trying to talk to her peers about Tolkien and joined the badminton team. It was a success. "I constructed a response that ultimately worked," she told me. Paul made friends. Soon, she was dating a baseball player.

Paul recounted this gut renovation of her personality and appearance without shame. This was not a story about someone who had forsaken her true self to please others. This was a story about someone who had identified an obstacle and, through dogged accounting, surmounted it. Paul has come to think of this period as the beginning of her decades-long attempt to decipher life as it is lived, not as it is schematized by contemporary philosophy.

But the tools that Paul needed to do such work were not yet at her disposal. She attended Antioch College, a small liberal-arts school in rural Ohio known for its radical politics, lack of grades, and chronic underfunding. At Antioch, philosophy "seemed to consist of meditation exercises," as Paul once put it, recalling a fellow-student making a photo mobile for his senior thesis. She majored in chemistry and biology, and planned to be a doctor. But, during an admissions interview at Harvard Medical School, she changed her mind. She remembers looking out at the imposing edifice of Widener Library and having an almost aesthetic epiphany: she wanted to be part of an intellectual community like the one she saw in front of her, and medical school did not belong in that vision. Paul went home and withdrew all her applications.

Paul eventually enrolled in a Master of Arts program at Antioch University in which students designed their own academic course of study. While deciding on a direction, she got a job doing airport pickups and drop-offs for professors who had speaking engagements at Antioch. One day, she was sent to retrieve Quentin Smith, then a philosopher at Purdue University. That drive resulted in a reading assignment (Heidegger's "Being and Time"), a pronouncement ("You are a philosopher"), and a directive ("Study with me"). Paul attended Smith's talk at Antioch—though she has no memory of it—and they exchanged contact information.

But she still couldn't figure out her academic path. Her father, a health-insurance executive, and her mother, a nurse, were disappointed that she was not pursuing medicine, and Paul decided that until she knew what she wanted to study—and could explain it convincingly—it was better to tell them as little as possible. She studied German in Berlin and then Buddhist philosophy at a monastery in India, but left frustrated with a teacher's insistence on the need for faith. She returned to Antioch, where Smith had been appointed a visiting professor, and entered into an intellectual apprenticeship with him.

Smith was considered strange. He stared at the stars for hours on end, and was rumored to have dug a hole at the beach and attempted to live in it. Paul was uncertain how much of Smith's personality was a performance and how much was real. He was interested in the origins of the universe and whether there was a God—"Not questions I was interested in," Paul said—but they both agreed that the significance of experience had been neglected by contemporary philosophy, or what little Paul knew of it.

Smith suggested that Paul read widely and reach out to philosophers whose work intrigued her. Perhaps, he said, they would agree to correspond with her for a modest sum. A letter-writing campaign resulted in a sort of pedagogical supervision-by-mail with three of them. Paul offered each a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar personal check and asked if they would reply to letters about their work, as well as comment on a paper of her own. They agreed to correspond with her, she now suspects, "not quite knowing what they were signing up for." Every two weeks for many months, Paul mailed at least twenty typewritten pages to each philosopher, attempting to dissect their arguments one by one. They responded to all of Paul's letters. By the end of the experiment, Paul felt surer of herself. She wrote a paper about the philosophy of time—"Truth Conditions of Tensed Sentence Types"—and used that, along with letters of recommendation from her epistolary tutors, to apply to twenty graduate programs, which she chose based on which had the lowest acceptance rates. She got into all but two and decided on Princeton, which was the most prestigious and home to David Lewis and Saul Kripke, two of the most famous working philosophers at the time. Paul arrived in 1993, having heard of hardly anyone in the department.

"I was overconfident," Paul recalled. "I had a background in natural science, these letters of recommendation." But she felt "like an alien," she said. "I just did not fit in." Panicked, she began to audit undergraduate philosophy classes. "I did a version of what I did in middle school," she said, laughing. "I realized I needed to learn how to do this work from the point of view of people in the field. I needed to learn, quickly, the jargon and assumptions and history."

A black-and-white photograph taken at the time shows the members of the philosophy department seated on the steps of a Gothic-style building. Professors in blazers sit among students in bluejeans. Paul appears in the front row, arms crossed, with a shaved head, in dark, gauzy clothing. She is smiling, but barely. Multiple people I spoke with, including Paul, talked about the culture of Princeton's philosophy department regretfully. It was "combative" and "hostile," a place of "uncharitable posturing" and "blood sport." Rumors swirled that the female graduate students were there only because of affirmative action. But the general antagonism, though especially intense at Princeton, was not unique to the university. Jonathan Schaffer, a philosopher at Rutgers and a friend of Paul's from that time, characterized the discipline back then as "a conservative, shitty, male-dominated holdout." Sexual harassment was rampant in the field. To insulate herself from it, Paul tried to make her dating life "very obvious" to everyone. "You just had to find yourself a protector," she told me, "and sort of parade this person around."

Of her time in graduate school, Paul said, "I learned at David's knee." David was David Lewis, a bearded Australophile and model-train enthusiast referred to affectionately by his colleagues as the "machine in the ghost." He was known for making the radical argument that "possible" worlds are as real as our own, a theory that is credited with reinvigorating twentieth-century metaphysics.

In her fourth year, Paul sat in on a fall seminar that Lewis gave on causation. Lewis, she learned, had read her graduate-school application and liked her paper, and she went on to revise it with his help. It became one of seven papers that she published while in graduate school, an accomplishment made possible, Paul has said, by the "devastating objections" that Lewis would leave for her in the margins of her drafts; she knew that there was no journal editor "who was going to say anything worse than what David had said to me."

After Paul graduated, in 1999, she published two books about causation with her Princeton classmate Ned Hall and held a series of academic jobs. She got tenure at the University of Arizona in 2007. Five years later, in 2012, she attended a conference in Nottingham, England, where Jonathan Schaffer was delivering a keynote speech. The work Paul was doing at the time was "the sort of very dry and abstract stuff that nobody outside the discipline understands or cares about," Schaffer said. But she was also playing around with the ideas that would coalesce in "Transformative Experience," and when she spoke of the work in progress to Schaffer she referred to it as her "little project on the side."

One morning, the two of them went for a run, during which Paul confided that she was professionally demoralized. "She felt like nobody was really citing her, nobody's work was really engaging with hers, and she just felt so defeated," Schaffer recalled. She told him that it was as if she were sending out messages in a bottle and having nothing come back. The image in Schaffer's mind was more poignant: "It was like she was standing alone in a corner of a crowded room. Everyone saw her there, everyone thought well of her, but nobody was trying to talk to her." He remembers their conversation so vividly because of its timing. "Here was someone who felt so excluded, so frustrated with her profession," he said, "and within a year—it really was just a year—she became this celebrated figure. She really did not expect that kind of reception."

Paul also did not expect that, in the years following the publication of "Transformative Experience," she would undergo a series of other transformative experiences herself. In 2017, Paul, who was teaching at U.N.C.-Chapel Hill, moved out of the house where she was living with her family and into a bungalow of her own nearby. The next year, Paul and her husband, who had been together for twenty-two years, divorced. Soon afterward, she moved to New Haven, where she had accepted a job at Yale.

Paul declined to discuss the exact reasons for the divorce, but she was open about its effects on her. She came to feel that divorce was just as dramatically transformative as having children. Paul compared marriage to a textile. Her identity had become so tightly woven together with her husband's that the individual stitches were no longer detectable. All she could see was the general design. She described their divorce as "ripping out the center of the pattern." Paul had assumed that, if she worked

"I had not realized just how many of the properties that I would have used to describe myself—that I would have thought of as essential to *me*—were, in fact, the result of my relationship," she said. If having a child had taught her things that she didn't know about herself, Paul felt that, in divorce, she was reminded of things about herself that she had forgotten.

There were many more changes to come. She had to work out a complex custody arrangement with her ex-husband. She bought an apartment in New Haven, inside a converted church rumored to have been struck by lightning. There was a global pandemic, which she weathered in part in Thailand. Her father died, and she and a sibling had to place their mother in assisted living. She began dating again, and eventually got remarried—to a German lawyer and policy consultant with two children of his own. "I've had a lot going on" is how Paul put it to me.

Last summer, we met for lunch at a restaurant in downtown Manhattan. For the previous few weeks, I had been avoiding e-mails from Paul inviting me on a trip she was taking to England, where she and a handful of colleagues would walk through the Derbyshire countryside, following a pilgrimage trail, and discuss the proposed itinerary, "growth and transformation." I had given a noncommittal response to her invitation and promised to get back to her with a more definitive one, though I never did.

The walking tour was scheduled for the first week of August. I would be thirty-eight weeks into a pregnancy that Paul was unaware of. I hadn't seen her for months, and the idea of casually telling her over e-mail that I was pregnant, after years of deliberation, had seemed cowardly. It felt as though I owed her some sort of reasoned explanation. How, in the end, had I decided?

Mercifully, Paul, who was already seated in a banquette when I arrived at the restaurant, never asked me the question. She just laughed when she saw me. "Wow," she joked. "You're really committed to this!"

It had felt like a kind of experiment: How could I use Paul's work to help me make the decision? But then, at some point, the investigation evaporated. In the previous nine months, the decision about whether to have a child had come to seem far less interesting than what would happen to me once I did. I told Paul this, tentatively, as if I were apologizing or insulting the premise of her work.

Again, she just laughed. And then she reassured me: deciding had never been the interesting part to her, either. She, too, was more interested in the personal change than in the decision itself. "That I framed it all in terms of epistemology and decision theory—I did that purposefully," she told me. Paul insisted that the approach was "not a trick" but that it was instrumental. "I knew that if I just talked about having a child—and the kind of emotional and also mental and psychological changes it wrought—no one would listen to me," Paul said. "I'm pretty good at understanding how to make my colleagues listen to things they don't want to hear."

We parted ways. She wished me luck. I went home and made tomato sauce. Something went wrong, though, and no amount of salt or olive oil or sugar seemed to help. The idea of eating it filled me with a dull, bad feeling. The sauce could not have represented more than four dollars' worth of ingredients, but instead of throwing it away I slopped it into a rinsed-out yogurt container. I imagined myself a few months into the future: deep-depressed and covered in the vomit of someone I hadn't yet met, I would be starving and flooded with gratitude for a hot meal, never mind that it was one that I myself had previously rejected. I scribbled "pasta sauce" on the lid and put the still warm container into the freezer.

Despite objecting to some of Paul's arguments, Elizabeth Barnes, the University of Virginia philosopher, routinely assigns the first few chapters of "Transformative Experience" to her undergraduates. "Most of my students instinctively want to say that Paul is wrong," she told me. "But in a room of twenty students they'll give me seventeen different reasons why." Many of them resist the premise that they need complete information about their futures, or bristle at the notion that changing their minds one day renders rational, present-day thought impossible. This multiplicity of disagreements would occur, Barnes went on, if you stocked that same room with professional philosophers. "And that," she said, "is the sign of a great argument." Paul, she continued, "asked an amazing question. . . . You can get why the question is cool regardless of whether her way of answering it is amenable to the way your own mind happens to work. I think sometimes, as philosophers, we forget we need these kinds of questions. I think the field has lost some of that spark—or maybe just the ability to communicate it."

This ability, which is really a kind of diplomacy, is evident in Paul's teaching style. When I visited her at Yale, her blackboard-lined classroom was packed with students eager to hear her speak about "the paradoxes of time travel," which was also the name of the course. While lecturing, she possesses the vigor of a beloved high-school teacher with a politician's polish. She paces, she scribbles, she tells outlandish, second-person stories. "How do you distinguish between memory and anticipation?" Paul asked, as everyone furiously took notes. "Between remembering something and anticipating it?" She paused. "That should puzzle you." She paused again. "It's very weird." Her theory of mind is well tuned for the eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-old demographic, and as she went over the syllabus, which would include not just philosophy papers but also sci-fi films ("La Jetée," "Primer") and a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, she warned the students not "to use the in-class essays to develop novel theories." These essays, she said, "are not the right conditions for that."

Her own work, however, is always being developed in novel ways. Transformative experience has been used to think through issues such as the decision to transition genders, the ethics of Alzheimer's treatment and the legal enforceability of advanced medical directives, and the "unique challenges white-blowers face," as one Dutch law professor recently put it. Not long ago, Paul was invited to Chicago to give a lecture about her work and its possible implications for neuroscience, and more than seven thousand people showed up. In recent years, she has collaborated with cognitive scientists to work through the ways in which it might one day be possible to fully align the values held by artificial intelligence with our own. Paul has her doubts. "Machines don't have experiences," she told me. "It's a fundamental problem."

The success of "Transformative Experience" created an inevitable appetite for a follow-up, and in 2015 Paul signed a contract, with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, for her first nonacademic book. She imagined it, at the time, as a sort of reiteration of "Transformative Experience" for a more general audience. But the subsequent string of disruptions in her personal life made retrospection less appealing. Seven years later, during her trip to Derbyshire, Paul finally managed to articulate to herself what the new book would be about. While trudging along, somewhere near Bakewell, she realized that she was preoccupied by the notion that we all consist of multiple selves who cannot be counted on to agree with one another across time. What drew her to the predicament was, in part, how ubiquitous it is—not just in life and literature but also in such disciplines as economics and psychology. We make plans with people we don't want to see. We confidently set aside three days to complete a task that historically has taken us fifteen. We recall with repulsion romantic encounters that we once eagerly pursued.

"The problem of other selves is just as deep and mysterious as the 'problem of other minds,' " she told me, referring to a classic and ever-evolving philosophical conundrum about the unknowability of the consciousness of others. "We exploit our other selves. We act badly toward them. We rely on them. Sometimes we try to deceive them. There's this whole network of relationships that we have with our other selves that are as involved and interesting and important and intimate as the relationships we have with other people." The fundamentally uncrossable barrier between individuals exists within each of us, too.

My daughter is now fifteen months old. I read less now, and I clean up more. It takes me forever to respond to text messages, if I ever do. My intermittent longings for freedom, once satisfied only by weeks of far-flung solitude, are now sated by ten-minute walks around the block. My desire to remain alive is no longer abstract or automatic, and I cross the street with an amount of caution that is new. But what it feels like to be me is the same as ever. The majority of my thoughts have been replaced with thoughts of my daughter, and yet my mind feels completely unaltered. This durability has been the most relieving, most disappointing, most surprising aspect of having a child. The tomato sauce remains in the freezer. Having a child changed my life, not my self. It did not turn me into a person who would eat that.

I recounted this to Paul. "Remind *me*," she said, "how long have you been a parent now?" I told her. "O.K.," she said. "So there's only a year's separation between the actual time line and the possible time line." She compared it to navigation: you take just a step or two off the path indicated on the map. It isn't much—that's where I was now—but keep going in that direction, she said, and after a while you will find yourself far, far away from the original destination. "I'm telling you, ten years from now, fifteen years . . ." ♦

Published in the print edition of the December 9, 2024, issue, with the headline "Note to Selves."

New Yorker Favorites

- A long-ago crime, suddenly remembered.
- A limousine driver watches her passengers transform.
- The day Muhammad Ali punched me.
- What is it like to be keenly intelligent but deeply alienated from simple emotions? Temple Grandin knows.
- The harsh realm of "gentle parenting."
- Retirement the Marguaritaville way.
- Fiction by F. Scott Fitzgerald: "Thank You for the Light."

Sign up for our daily newsletter to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Alice Gregory has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2013.

Get *The New Yorker's* daily newsletter

Keep up with everything we offer, plus exclusives available only to newsletter readers, directly in your in-box.

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our user agreement (including class action waiver and arbitration provisions) and acknowledge our privacy policy.

READ MORE

PROFILES
Sayaka Murata's Alien Eye
The author of "Convenience Store Woman" has gained a cult following by setting the ordinary world a science fiction.
By Elif Batuman

PAGE TURNER
How "The Great Gatsby" Took Over High School
The classroom staple turns a hundred.
By Alexander Monahal

A REPORTER AT LARGE
Starved in Jail
Why are incarcerated people dying from lack of food or water, even as private companies are paid millions for their care?
By Sarah Stillman

SPONSORED CONTENT
If You Find the Boston Marathon® Inspiring, These Athlete Stories Will Move You
Sponsored by Nike

THE POLITICAL SCENE
Is the U.S. Becoming an Autocracy?
Other countries have watched their democracies slip away gradually, without tanks in the streets. That may be where we're headed—or where we already are.
By Andrew Marantz

UNDER REVIEW
Can A.I. Writing Be More Than a Gimmick?
Vauhini Vara consulted ChatGPT to help craft her new book, "Searches." But the most moving sections are the ones she wrote herself.
By Anna Wiener

BOOKS
James C. Scott and the Art of Resistance
The late political scientist enjoined readers to look for opposition to authoritarian states not in revolutionary vanguards but in acts of quiet disobedience.
By Nikil Saval

AMERICAN CHRONICLES
A Hundred Classics to Get Me Through a Hundred Days of Trump
Each morning, before the day's discon, I turned to a slim book, hoping for sense, or solace.
By Jill Lepore

ANNALS OF LAW
A Lawyer Freed Young Thug. Now He's Defending Daddy
Since the Young Thug trial, Brian Steel has modelled for the rapper's fashion brand and had a Drake song named after him. Sean Combs took note.
By Charles Bethea

BOOKS
The "Lady Preacher" Who Became World-Famous—and Then Vanished
Aimee Semple McPherson took to the radio to spread the Gospel, but her mysterious disappearance cast a shadow on her reputation.
By Casey Cep

THE WEEKEND ESSAY
Who Was Mary Magdalene, Really?
The subject of numerous controversies, she is defined by ambiguity, welcoming outcasts to the Church and provoking more imaginative approaches to faith.
By Elisa Gorontzi

THE FRONT ROW
What Pauline Kael Failed to See About Young Film Lovers
The first piece Kael wrote for *The New Yorker*, "Movies on Television," suggests why she remains a vexing influence in cinema more than a half century later.
By Richard Brody

Special Offer
A gift they'll love.
Give your loved one a subscription to The New Yorker and get a free tote for yourself.
NEW YORKER KOO
Give a gift

© 2025 Condé Nast. All rights reserved. The New Yorker may earn a portion of sales from products that are purchased through our site as part of our Affiliate Partnerships with retailers. The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Condé Nast. Ad Choices

Your Privacy Choices