



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Lebowitz Award Winners on How We Reason in Moments of Transformation

The Lebowitz Award is presented each year to a pair of outstanding philosophers who hold contrasting views on a topic of current interest in the field. The 2020 winners, University of Chicago's Agnes Callard and Yale's Laurie Paul, speak with Fred about their differing approaches to understanding and explaining what principles and mechanisms guide decision making when people face significant decisions.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I welcome two remarkable philosophers, Dr. Agnes Callard and Dr. Laurie Paul. Agnes Callard is Associate Professor in Philosophy at the University of Chicago. Laurie Paul is Professor of Philosophy and Cognitive Science at Yale University. These two scholars are this year's recipients of the Lebowitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution, awarded by the Phi Beta Kappa Society in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, the APA. The award is for recognition of outstanding achievement in the field of philosophy.

Each year, the Lebowitz Award is presented to a pair of highly regarded philosophers who hold contrasting views on an important philosophical question. This year's topic, Personal Transformation and Practical Reason, focuses on what guides our decision making process when we're faced with some of the most significant choices in our lives. They presented their work virtually at the APA Eastern Division meeting in January 2021.

Lebowitz Award Winners on How We Reason in Moments of Transformation

It's great to have both of you with us today here on Key Conversations. You know, the purpose of the Lebowitz Prize, one of our most esteemed prizes for achievement in philosophy, is to seek out projects that, while true to the enterprise of philosophy, have demonstrable and dare I say it, accessible practical implications. So, I'm particularly pleased to have you with me today to talk a little bit about this year's topic, Personal Transformation and Practical Reason. It certainly fits within that description. Seems to me decision making and our sense of self as we're faced with significant life decisions and events, and as we're affected by those decisions and events, is not only relevant in the abstract, but we're living through times right now where we think about this just about every day.

And I want to get into some of those issues shortly, but first, I want to take you both through just a little bit of the journeys that brought you to this point. So, Agnes, let me start with you. Where did you grow up and was there a teacher, or a parent, or a friend who particularly influenced you in the direction of philosophy?

Agnes Callard: I was born in Hungary and I came to the United States when I was about six. Maybe the most influential teacher I had was one as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago who taught a class called Human Being and Citizen. Up until that point, so this is like my freshman year in college, I was pretty sure that I wanted to go into math and science. I wanted to be a physics major. I had been better at math and science in high school. And in that class, we read Genesis, we read The Iliad, we read Socratic dialogues, and I had this incredible revelation that there were questions about truth and falsity, like that there was truth and falsity to be had in that sphere.

Up until that point, I thought like, "Look, if you want something true or false, you have to be in the science or math game, because in humanities, people are just making stuff up." So, for me that was in a way the discovery of philosophy. In some sense, I had been exposed to philosophy before then. It was that revelation that you could care about the truth and be talking about literature, and be talking about courage, really just created this pivot point into my orientation.

Lawrence: Laurie, tell us about your background. Where did you grow up and also was there sort of a moment when you said, "It's going to be philosophy."

Laurie Paul: I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and the way I got to philosophy was a bit strange, because when I went to college I studied chemistry and biology, and physics, so also science, and I especially loved organic chemistry, actually. I loved solving problems. But then I suddenly decided I wanted to do philosophy. And the problem is I'd never actually had a philosophy class, and I tried to take a philosophy class and did very badly, so I dropped out, and then I just traveled around in India, and then I lived in Germany for a little while, sort of exploring other kinds of ideas. And I was interested in meditation, and Buddhist thought, and also kind of Hindu mythologies, and thought maybe this was something I wanted to explore.

And then decided no, I did want to study philosophy. Went back to Antioch College, which is where I got my degree from, and put together an independent study program. I

wrote to several prominent philosophers, asked to read their books, and talk to them about their work, which I then did, which gave me some background in philosophy, which I used to apply to graduate school.

Lawrence: Let's go through that part slowly. What a colossal act of nerve and yet-

Paul: Attitude. Yes.

Lawrence: And yet at the same time, but what an inspiration. Are you comfortable sharing the names of some of the people who you were in touch with during that time?

Paul: One of the main people who I worked with was Nancy Cartwright, who is a philosopher of science, brilliant thinker, and I read her book. I sent her pages and pages of commentary on every chapter, and I had never even taken a philosophy class, but this was on science, and of course I had some background in organic chemistry, and also I was always the kid who was asking all the annoying questions in class, like all the time. And she was very patient with me, and so we had letter after letter over sort of a six-month period. I also studied with Lynne Rudder Baker, read her book, and wrote back and forth to her. And then there was a professor named Quentin Smith, who was a very unusual, interesting thinker, who I also talked with and exchanged letters with.

But I applied to several places and because I had no background, some places rejected me. Harvard rejected me, but Princeton said yes. I went to Princeton and I studied with David Lewis, who is a metaphysician. He was also incredibly supportive and amazing, because when you go to graduate school without any philosophy background aside from discussing a few selected books with a few selected philosophers, you have a lot to make up for. And then everything else, I learned from David, basically.

Lawrence: So, let's turn to the topic that won both of you the Lebowitz Prize. Agnes, let me start with you and try out at least my first take on your provocative work on what you call proleptic reasoning, which I understand to be reasoning from the perspective of a future and a changed or transformed time. I will tell you that I'm actually more familiar with this idea from the literary device of analeptic prolepsis, where a character is struck by the fact that the moment being lived through now will be reflected upon in the future. Henry James was famous for this.

So, how does proleptic reasoning work and what does it tell us about the process of transformation in our lives?

Callard: You could sort of see the analeptic reasoning as like the correct or perfected version of the proleptic reasoning. So, in a way, it's superior, right? The point of view you have looking back, one feels much wiser, right? But the problem is a lot of our actual deliberations, and decisions, and thinking about what to do has to happen before. And so, we often have to be navigating our lives with a kind of incomplete sense not only of the facts of the situation, right, but even of our own values. So, we might be in the process of developing some value, of coming to value something, and if you're in that process, you kind of want to think about your life, and your decisions, and even your emotions and your feelings from the point of view of the person that you will be once

you fully acquire that value. That is, you want to judge yourself from that point of view rather than from the point of view you have now, where you might in a way be too easily satisfied.

Lawrence: And Laurie, do I have it right that you don't so much disagree with the fact that we might do that, but you wouldn't call that reasoning?

Paul: Well, the way that I would put it is I think that this is something that we very much want to do, but there are a number of distinctive big life contexts where we can't do it, and that the fact that we can't do it creates a certain kind of problem for this rational decision making and reasoning.

Lawrence: So, tell us a little more about that. What is it we do as we imagine the us we will be in the future?

Paul: The work that I do on transformative experience argues that in certain kinds of contexts, transformative contexts as I would call them, we can find ourselves faced with a sort of choice about whether or not to do something, or undertake some kind of attempt, or have in particular a life-changing experience. And we want to assess how valuable that's going to be and what that's going to do to us before we decide to do it. And one of my favorite cases is the choice of whether or not to have a child. I talk about other kinds of examples, as well.

And the problem, I think, is that you want to step into your future shoes, or into the shoes that you might occupy, and see what it's like to kind of be that person, to live that life and evaluate it before you decide, especially if it's an irreversible choice, to become that self. But what if that experience that you're considering would actually change who you were at a very fundamental level and change the way that you experience the world? If that's the case, there's a kind of incompatibility with who you might become, and I worry that this raises a certain very distinctive kind of one might say logical or rational puzzle.

My concern is that we often assess these possibilities through what I think of as model-based reasoning, where we construct models for ourselves in our lives, and then assess them and assign them values, and we choose the model that we think is best because that's what we're supposed to do if we're doing it rationally. The worry is that we fool ourselves into thinking that's what we're able to do, but in fact, we can't do it.

Lawrence: In a more sort of a common experience take on this, I think those of us who've had children have the experience pretty early on after your children are born that you immediately regret any advice you gave your friends about their children before you've had kids, because you realize you had no idea what you were talking about. Imagining the parent I was going to be... Agnes, I'm coming back to you now. It does feel beyond reach. I mean, it's speculative. It's interesting. It might even be aspirational. But is it really reasoning?

Callard: I think maybe just to emphasize something that I think Laurie and I agree on, I think a lot of people would tend to try to assimilate the kind of thinking you're doing there with

the kind of thinking that you're doing when you decide like, "Do I want a new car, or would I rather spend this money on a vacation?" Right? Where you can have lists of pros and cons and you can create a model of what your life will look like with a car and a model of what your life will look like with the vacation and compare them. Right?

And there, what's distinctive about that case is that your values, your fundamental values are held fixed throughout that. You're not going to come to love cars or come to love vacations as a result of this decision. But when you think of someone like Charles Darwin famously made a list of pros and cons about getting married, right? And he's like, "Oh, if I get married, I'll have to restrict my travels," and it's a bit absurd to try to assimilate the marriage case to the car-versus-vacation case. And that absurdity I think, Laurie and I think, is really there. There really is an important difference.

In the marriage case, like if he decides to get married, he's going to become a different person. So, that means if it's going to be in any sense a rational decision, it won't be a rational decision in the same sense in which the vacation-car choice is rational. So, then the question is: is there some other sense of rational? I'm willing to say that the kind of reasoning that you're doing, you can't ever be certain while you're doing it that you're on the right track, but we're seeking out advice, we're kind of aware that we're not sure what we're doing, like all of that in a way is very rational. We're understanding the situation that we're in well. I don't think we are just deluded into thinking that we're in the car-vacation case.

So, one place where I see in effect the rationality of the aspirant is in the kind of characteristic insecurity and even shame that comes with just sort of knowing that you don't know what you're doing.

Lawrence: Right. And the awareness, the self-consciousness of the lack of full mastery of the situation, and even the ability to bring to bear sufficient experience to master the experience.

Callard: Yeah. There's something rational about a certain kind of humility, I think.

Lawrence: What are we doing if we're not doing rational assessment of goals, desires, and means of meeting them, but we're planning, what is it we're doing?

Paul: It's perfectly rational with no information to try to make a prediction in any way that you can, right? But before the pandemic happened, there were lots of models about what pandemics involved, and people were talking about how... that we know we'll face a pandemic in the future. And people assigned values to different kinds of possibilities and all kinds of scenarios and took them more or less seriously. And I think as we all know now, first of all, we didn't assign values in the right way. We didn't take things seriously enough. And we had no idea what it would be like to have to kind of live through a pandemic.

Maybe it was rational to try to do the things that we did in another sense. It's like do the best that you can. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the specific

decisions we made about what we would do in a pandemic based on this thought that we actually knew what to expect, and so could figure out what the best options were.

Lawrence: So, let me try another example. It's the end-of-life decision. You can't help when you're still healthy and well to imagine that if all you had was that time in the ICU, you'd say, "Well, I don't want that. That's not a life. I'd rather be let pass away than live like that." But in fact, when it's the only alternative to not being alive anymore, it suddenly looks different. So, how does that map onto what we're talking about and how might it actually affect what we should be doing about the kinds of decisions that people make about end-of-life care prior to those days coming on?

Paul: I think this is a really good example of the kind of case that I'm quite interested in. You have the self that's able bodied, and maybe the self that's constructed an advanced directive or something like that. And then you have the self that is no longer able bodied and is under conditions of duress, whatever those are. And ordinarily, you would think that if the self stayed the same across that stretch of time, then the desires that you have beforehand would be relevant later when you're under those conditions of duress.

So, there are two dimensions though of this situation that make that assumption problematic. The first one is there's I think an epistemic issue in that you can't appreciate early on just what it's going to be like for you to be under those conditions of duress. Early on, you're able bodied, and so there's an ability or a capacity that you lack. But I think there's another thing here too, and that is that if that situation, or if undergoing that experience actually changes your preferences, like changes who you are in a basic way, and that can happen in some of these cases, especially if there's cognitive decline, maybe you don't care about things that you used to care about, but if the self that you are changes, then there's a further problem about who's supposed to be in charge when the decision involved is enacted? The person or the self that existed beforehand or the self that you are now?

Rationality assumes that the individual making the choice stays the same. I don't know what the solutions are with advanced directives. I think that one thing that ends up happening is that people defer to the individual at the time. But if there is the kind of cognitive decline that I was talking about, then that person might not be able to express themselves or make a decision, so it becomes very I think interesting, difficult, and important to-

Callard: You might think that deferring to the individual at the time is a way of depriving people of a certain kind of autonomy, right? Like I might want to exercise my autonomy now by saying do such and such to me, even if I say otherwise at the later time, right? And I might, if I can't say that, I might feel like there's a way in which I don't have control over my own life. They're cases where our preferences seem to shift in the presence of the desired object.

I think we do have the thought that at least some of the time, it's possible to kind of like exercise some kind of authority over your future self, and that those forms of authority are important to us and are part of what we mean by autonomy. And so, a blanket

statement that we just listen to the person at the time in a way deprives us of a certain kind of autonomy.

Lawrence: Right. And it does sort of beg the question of who are we, right? This is Einstein saying, "What if time is not a constant?" Yeah. Well, what if we are not a constant? We actually become different people over the course of our lives. Who gets to make the decision to bind who at which time?

I want to ask you both one of my favorite questions to ask our guests on Key Conversations, and that is to help our readers to fill out their bookshelves, their reading lists in each of the fields of our guests. Books for the serious general reader that will help open some of these questions of philosophy to our readers. Now, I have to say that I find much of your work actually quite accessible to a serious read, even without a particular background in philosophy. Agnes, your work *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*, Oxford Press in 2018. And Laurie, your wonderful work *Causation: A User's Guide* with Ned Hall. I must admit as a criminal law professor, that may be one that's of particular interest to me, because we do a lot with causation. That's also Oxford Press in 2013. But then *Transformative Experience*, Oxford Press in 2014.

If either of you has got a thought on that, listen, I'm a law professor. I know how to cold call on people too.

Callard: Sure. I'll start. Okay, I have to start with Plato's dialogues. They're very accessible. I would start with the sort of traditionally Socratic dialogues, the *Laches*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Minos*, the *Phaedo*. I mean, all the dialogues around the death of Socrates, they're conversations. And they're conversations that Socrates is having with people who are not philosophers, so they're kind of like the original podcasts. And you can buy them all in one big volume. It's not that expensive. Cheap paperbacks of just like the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Minos*, *Phaedo*. So, that would be my number one recommendation for people if you haven't read those.

For like a contemporary text, I recently read this book called *The Grasshopper* by Bernard Suits, which is just a really fun, well done, lively book about whether or not life is a game. And he thinks kind of seriously and thoughtfully about what does it mean for something to be a game, and like for there to be these challenges that we set for ourselves, and like are the challenges that we set for ourselves in life kind of fake the way they are in games? Many people would enjoy that book and it's written for a general audience.

You know, I recently just read William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* for the first time, but it's a text about... that approaches religion from an angle that I've never thought about it before, which is like what does religion do for us psychologically? And in particular, this is what I thought was so interesting, how do different religions do different things for different kinds of people? That is, it takes seriously the phenomenon of sort of human heterogeneity, which philosophers rarely do. I would say it's one of the things philosophers are least attentive to, is like that we are not all alike. That we think differently, that we have different temperaments. It's quite nice to read... I mean, they

were a series of talks, and then at the end you get this wonderful ending where sort of James himself has to come down either for or against religion, and he... I don't know if I should give it away. Is it a spoiler? It's probably not a spoiler. He comes down for. He's like, "Yeah, I'm a religious person. I'm all in." Anyway, it's a great book.

Lawrence: And he's all in for a pretty deep reason. He had a pretty serious nervous breakdown. This is what allows him to survive. So, talk about not compartmentalizing. Thank you for bringing Varieties of Religious Experience to the table. It's a fabulous work and bears up with rereading, and certainly if it feels like a lot is at stake, it's because you feel from him that everything is at stake in that work.

Laurie, what do you think?

Paul: Yes, I endorse all of Agnes's suggestions. I would say if you want metaphysics, then one of my favorite books is from Sean Carroll. It's called From Eternity to Here and it's on the nature and structure of time, temporal experience, and time travel. It's a wonderful, wonderful book. Beautifully written. Lots of physics and philosophy. Incredibly accessible and really well done.

Another book that I really like is actually... It's a collection of essays by Edna Ullmann-Margalit. That's called Normal Rationality: Decisions and Social Order, and it was edited by Avishai Margalit and Cass Sunstein, and I think her writing is beautiful and incredibly important as she talks about a lot of issues that came up here today. I think she was really the... a lot of the early work that anticipated our work is in that collection.

Finally, if you want something even a little bit, like a little lighter, I recommend Undercover Robot: My First Year as a Human. Good for children and for thinking adults. It's super cool, extremely funny, and you can get it on Amazon. It's by Dave Edmonds.

Lawrence: Wonderful. Well, thank you for bringing those, as well as your thoughts on it. I'm so pleased that you are our Lebowitz Prize winners this year. I think you represent exactly what the Lebowitz Prize is about, both in terms of people approaching a similar problem from different perspectives in a constructive way, but also a problem that comes with real philosophical rigor but is not abstraction for the sake of abstraction, but is very much about the here and now, and who we are, and what our lives are about, and it's pretty hard to think of more fundamental issues that we're all wrestling with all the time, particularly in the times in which we're living, so thank you so much for joining me today on Key Conversations.

Paul: Thank you for having me.

Callard: Thank you.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Virginia Lora is managing producer, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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