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# Choosing to be changed: Revelation, identity and the ethics of self-transformation

## Abstract

How one should decide whether to undergo an experience that changes who one is? In her discussion of “transformative experiences”, L. A. Paul argues that, to choose rationally when deliberating first-personally, one should base one’s decision on “revelation”, i.e. to discover out what the experience will be like. If this solution is taken as the sole means by which a transformative choice is made, then I argue it is problematic. This is because (i) it overlooks the role that one’s practical identity ought to play when making a major life-decision; and (ii) it ignores morally-relevant reasons for action. Even if we retain the revelation approach as only part of the means through which a transformative choice is made, I argue that revelation should frequently carry little weight in our decision-making. Rather than focusing on the subjective quality of future experiences, it is often preferable to reflect on who one is and what one’s endorsed practical identity commits one to.

Key words: Identity; L. A. Paul; Rational choice; Revelation; Self-transformation; Transformative experiences

## 1. Introduction

How should one make a decision that will change who one is? This is a question that each of us will confront on numerous occasions, whether deliberating about having a child, moving to a new country or changing one’s career. Laurie Paul’s recent discussion of “transformative experiences” addresses precisely this issue (Paul, 2014, 2015a). Owing to the transformative nature of significant life-choices, Paul argues that one cannot make them using the standard normative model of rational deliberation, which is the method that we ‘naturally and

intuitively' want to employ in everyday life (Paul, 2015b, p. 761). This model involves assigning a subjective value to each possible outcome by imagining what it will be like to experience them and selecting the one with the highest value (i.e. the best expected subjective experiential value). This value must be assigned by the agent him/herself, as it is derived from their experience itself, rather than from features of the world. The problem is that, when considering a transformative experience (hereafter "TE"), one cannot know what the experience will be like and how it will change one's preferences. Consequently, one cannot assign the necessary subjective values to the possible outcomes in order to choose between them. Instead, Paul argues that, to choose rationally, one must decide to undergo a TE for the sake of "revelation"; that is, on the basis of wanting to discover what the experience will be like.

Some theorists have denied that there is a problem here. They claim that the standard model of rational choice can easily accommodate deliberation about uncertain, or even unknowable, outcomes (Dougherty et al., 2015; Pettigrew, 2015). Others have argued that I can have sufficient knowledge of what it will be like for me to have a TE, for example by relying on the testimony of others (Harman, 2015) or because of the relationship between the phenomenal character of an experience and epistemically available facts about its non-phenomenal character (Sharadin, 2015). Unlike these theorists, I think that Paul identifies a genuine problem. However, I suggest that Paul's solution – to choose on the basis of revelation – is incomplete and potentially morally problematic. It is incomplete because it makes no reference to the role that one's practical identity does and *should* play in rational deliberation about TEs. It would be morally problematic if it is treated as the sole, or even main, basis upon which many transformative decisions are made. This is because such choices frequently involve important ethical considerations, which the revelation solution, on

its own, cannot incorporate. This is especially the case with transformative choices that directly affect other people.

As a necessary addition to Paul's revelation argument, I present an account of rational deliberation about TEs that focuses on one's practical identity and the reasons for action that it provides. Crucially, such deliberation does not depend on imagining what it will be like to have the experience. Rather, it involves acting in a way that is reflective of who one is, i.e. one's reflectively-endorsed values, preferences, commitments and social roles. This allows one to act with integrity, and ensures that one's decision is justified, regardless of how one is changed by the experience itself. Importantly, this practical identity account fits well with the ethical dimension of much decision-making. One's reasons for choosing a TE should often be acceptable to other people, specifically, those people directly affected by it. Basing a decision on reasons grounded in one's identity will often enable one to justify one's decision to these people in a way that the revelation solution cannot.

Thus, my discussion is not offered as a refutation of, alternative to, Paul's account. Rather, it is as a necessary enrichment of it. I show that our decision-making about TEs should not be made solely or primarily by determining how strongly we value revelatory experiences or, more generally, by imagining the subjective experiential value of an outcome. It should also include reference to the kind of person one is and wants to be. I also highlight the ethical nature of many, perhaps most, of the transformative choices we make. There is thus no one single solution to the problem of transformative choices. Rather, an adequate solution must acknowledge the plurality of reasons that are relevant to one's decision, including the role of one's practical identity and the moral nature of one's decisions. The result is a more complex picture of decision-making, but one that is more normatively appealing, and perhaps more

reflective of how many of us do deliberate, than that offered by much of the current discussion about TEs.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I define what a TE is and the challenge that it poses to the standard normative model of rational decision-making. In section 3, I outline Paul's solution to this problem. In section 4, I show that this solution is incomplete and outline a necessary enrichment of it, which focuses on how one's practical identity can guide one's decision-making when faced with a TE. In section 5, I demonstrate why Paul's solution, if taken as the sole means of deciding what to do, can be ethically unacceptable and how to avoid this problem. Thus, my overall aim is to improve our understanding of how one can choose to be changed in a rationally and ethically acceptable manner.

## **2. Paul's challenge**

At various times in one's life one must make a decision that has significant ramifications for who one is and the kind of life one leads. Such decisions can change one's values and preferences, sometimes quite profoundly and unexpectedly. In her recent work, Paul explores how one can rationally make these decisions through the concept of a "transformative experience" (Paul, 2015a, 2014).<sup>1</sup> A TE can be transformative in two ways: epistemically and personally. An *epistemically* TE involves having 'a new and different kind of experience, a kind of experience that teaches [a person] something she could not have learned without having that kind of experience' (Paul, 2014, p. 10).<sup>2</sup> It involves experiencing for the first time

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<sup>1</sup> Paul acknowledges the influence of Ullmann-Margalit's work on her thinking about this issue. See Ullmann-Margalit (2007, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Here Paul draws on Jackson (1982).

what something is like from the subjective, first-person point of view (i.e. what something is like *for me*). For example, a teenager may have their first sexual encounter or a blind person might see for the first time. A *personally* TE is one that ‘can change your point of view, and by extension, your personal preferences, and perhaps even the kind of person that you are or at least take yourself to be’ (Paul, 2014, p. 16).

Paul is interested in those experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative. Having such an experience ‘teaches you something new, something that you could not have known before the experience, while also changing you as a person’ (Paul, 2014, p. 17). She discusses several examples, including becoming a vampire (Paul, 2014, pp. 43–50), giving one’s deaf child a cochlear implant (Paul, 2014, pp. 56–70), having a child (Paul, 2014, pp. 71–94, 2015a) and changing one’s career (Paul, 2014, pp. 98–103). Paul is concerned with how one can make these decisions in a rational manner.<sup>3</sup> She argues that they *cannot* be made within the terms of the standard account of normative decision-making. This is because it describes a decision procedure in which one imagines a variety of possible options and selects the “best” one, defined as that which has the highest expected subjective experiential value (Paul, 2014, p. 21). That is, ‘You simulate the relevant possible outcomes for yourself... you simulate what it would be like for you to have each of these experiences and what your life would be like after these experiences’ (Paul, 2014, p. 26).

According to Paul, the problem that TEs pose for this model of deliberation is that you cannot know what value such experiences will have *for you*. Because they are epistemically novel, you cannot know what it is like to undergo the experience until you have had it. This thwarts

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<sup>3</sup> Typically, TEs will be significant life-choices that have a strong impact upon a central feature of one’s life. Thus, I will treat “TEs” and “significant life-choices” as depicting roughly the same group of decisions and experience.

‘our ability to rationally assign subjective values to radically new outcomes’ (Paul, 2014, p. 47). Because they are personally transformative, you cannot know how you will feel about the decision. This is because your preferences, desires and values will be altered by the experience itself. Knowledge of how you will be changed is epistemically closed off from pre-choice self (Paul, 2014, pp. 47–8). Consequently, the decision to have a TE contains a basic, inescapable ignorance: ‘ignorance about what it will be like to undergo the experience and ignorance about how the experience will change you’ (Paul, 2014, p. 32).<sup>4</sup>

The upshot of this is that the choice to undergo a TE cannot be made using the standard normative model of decision-making, for no subjective values can be assigned to the possible outcomes that one is to select between. For example, when it comes to having a child one cannot know what this experience will be like and how it will affect one’s preferences, values and the like. Consequently, ‘if you want to make the choice rationally, you cannot use the ordinary, culturally sanctioned, subjectively based approach to having a child, the approach where you deliberate about whether to have a child by envisioning what the outcomes involving your lived experience as a parent would be like’ (Paul, 2014, p. 83).

### **3. Paul’s solution: Choosing revelation**

Paul’s solution is to keep the standard model of decision-making as it is and to understand transformative choices as involving the decision to have a “revelatory” experience (Paul, 2014, p. 113ff.). She argues that, although one cannot assign a subjective value to the experience prior to having it, one can know beforehand whether one values having new and

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<sup>4</sup> Paul’s problem echoes Kierkegaard’s observation that life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards. We only know what we need to know when it is too late (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 12).

transformative, i.e. revelatory, experiences. Accordingly, one can rationally choose to undergo the experience on this basis, irrespective of the actual experiential nature of the event in question:

[T]o choose rationally, you must prefer to discover whether and how your preferences will change. If you choose to avoid the transformative experience, to choose rationally, you must prefer not to discover whether your preferences will change. The idea is that if you choose revelation, you choose it for its own sake (Paul, 2014, p. 118).

To return to one of Paul's favoured examples, you cannot know how you will be changed by becoming a parent and you cannot know what it will be like *for you* to be one. Thus, you cannot know what future preferences you will have and whether being a parent will satisfy them. Therefore, to choose to have a child in a rationally acceptable manner, 'you don't choose it because you know what it will be like – you choose it in order to *discover who you'll become*' (Paul, 2014, p. 119). In other words, 'you choose the experience for the sake of discovery itself' (Paul, 2014, p. 120).

Let us consider another example. Julia is a doctor. She is deciding whether to volunteer with an aid agency to work in a hospital in a war-torn part of Syria. Until now, she has lived and worked in a small, English town. Paul's account of the standard model of rational deliberation holds that Julia should make her decision by first considering the options available to her – "working in Syria" and "not working in Syria" – and then determining which outcome will have the greatest subjective utility value, based upon what she imagines it will be like for her to experience each outcome. The problem is that, prior to making the



decision, Julia – given her life-experience up until now – cannot know (a) what the experience of working in Syria will be like and (b) how the experience will alter her preferences and values. Consequently, she cannot assign an expected value to the “working in Syria” option. However, she does know whether she values having “revelatory” experiences; she knows whether she values having new experiences and discovering how she is changed by them. If she does value revelation, then it would be rational to choose to work in Syria, regardless of its experiential quality.

It is important to note that Paul is considering a particular form of practical rationality, which involves envisioning possible futures and deciding which one you prefer to bring about. She is addressing subjective deliberation made from one’s first-personal point of view (Paul, 2014, p. 24). Thus, she allows that there are other rational ways of deciding how to act. For example, as Barnes notes, it would be rational to decide to have a child if one is the queen and an heir to the throne is needed (Barnes, 2015, p. 778). One is here responding to impersonal reasons to have a child, which do not arise from one’s first-personal perspective on the situation.<sup>5</sup> Paul’s argument is that, when one is deliberating about what to do from one’s first-personal perspective – when asking oneself, “what do *I* want to do” – the rational way of doing this with regard to a TE is by choosing on the basis of revelation.

To clarify the discussion, it is useful to distinguish between two possible versions of Paul’s argument. The strong version states that the *only* way that one can rationally decide to undergo it is on the basis of revelation. The weak version says that, *if* one wants to base one’s decision on subjective valuations of future experiences, then one can only refer to the value of revelation itself, rather than what the experience itself will be like for you. Experiential

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5 Of course, one must still decide, from one’s perspective, whether to do what is required of one as queen. The point is that the reasons themselves are independent of one’s first-person perspective.

value can form part of one's deliberative process, but it is set alongside other relevant methods of choice.<sup>6</sup>

We can imagine someone who is uncertain whether to undergo a TE. She reads Paul's work in the hope of finding some guidance. She may either (i) adopt the strong version and decide to base her decision solely on the value that revelation has for her; or (ii) adopt the weak version and invoke the value of revelation only if she wants to consider the experiential value of the possible outcomes. Thus, she will then have to settle the question of what reasons to be guided by in making her decision. As noted, Paul allows that we can base a decision on a variety of reasons, including non-first-personal ones. Thus, she endorses the weak version of her argument. Nevertheless, she also emphasises repeatedly the importance of making a decision based on imagining what the outcomes will be like, that is, their *experiential* value. For example:

On my view, for many big, life-changing decisions, you want to authentically assess your options by assessing the subjective value of your possible future lived experiences. Ideally, the assessment involves a determination of the subjective value of each possible outcome of your decision, that is, each possible lived experience, by imaginatively grasping what it would be like for you to live in that future (Paul, 2015c, p. 807).

In the case where you have a child, the relevant outcomes are phenomenal outcomes concerning what it is like for you to have your child, including what it is like to have the beliefs, desires, emotions and dispositions that result, directly and indirectly, from having your own child. Thus, the relevant values are determined by what it is like for you to have your child (Paul, 2015a, p. 153).

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<sup>6</sup> I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for clarifying my thinking on this issue.

Consequently, upon reading Paul's work, one may find oneself either pushed toward the strong version, or pushed toward accepting the weak version but placing great emphasis on subjective experiential value (and hence revelation). In the next section, I argue that the strong version is mistaken because it overlooks important ways in which we can, and often should, decide to undergo a TE that do involve the idea of revelation. I suggest that the weak version is defensible, but we must be careful how much weight we give to the value of revelation in relation to other relevant practical reasons. Often, I argue, it will be inappropriate to give much, if any, consideration to future experiential value when deciding what to do. In these cases, the revelation solution should play little or no role in our deliberative process. For example, deciding to have a child should primarily involve reflection on what one currently values, the kind of person one wants to be and one's existing commitments, rather than a focus on what the *experience* of having a child will be like and how it will change who one is. Thus, although Paul is right to endorse the weak version of her argument, I still worry that she places too much emphasis on the importance of future experiences when making significant life choices. If we are to solve the problem of TEs, then we need a richer, more complex account of rational decision-making than Paul's discussion provides. I argue that reflecting on one's practical identity and how it can guide one's decisions will help to provide this account.

#### **4. Rational choice and practical identity**

That an outcome will have the highest experiential value compared to other possible outcomes can certainly be a good reason for choosing it. Consider, for example, deciding to drink lemonade instead of coffee. However, this is not the only way that one can or should think about decision-making when deliberating in a first-personal manner. One's practical identity – composed of one's values, preferences, social roles, commitments and the like – provides significant normative resources for rational deliberation and justification. This applies to cases that involve radical uncertainty about what the outcomes will be like and how they will affect who one is. Importantly, one need not consider how one's practical identity

relates to expected experiential outcomes when deliberating in this way. Rather, one's practical identity normatively orients one in the world and provides one with reasons for action, regardless of what it is like to experience the consequences of one's choices.

This account rests upon the fact that a person's practical identity is inherently action-guiding. For example, social groups and identities – e.g. being “gay”, “female” and/or “African-American” – have normative expectations (social scripts) built into them that legislate appropriate forms of behaviour for that identity. In Appiah's words, they contain ‘modes of behaviour’; they ‘provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping the ground projects of those for whom these collective identities are central to their individual identities’ (Appiah, 2005, p. 108). Insofar as one *identifies* with the identity in question, then one has reasons to act in certain ways, and hence to make certain choices, consistent with the demands of that identity. One's choices need not be determined by the content of one's social identity, but one should be sensitive to its demands *if* one identifies with it. In addition, reasons for action can also be derived from one's social roles, values and commitments, as well as the obligations that arise from them (again, assuming that one identifies with or endorses these roles, values and commitments). These reasons for action consist in what it is normatively appropriate for a person who has the value, relationship, role or social / collective identity in question to do.<sup>7</sup>

To illustrate this, consider again Julia's decision to volunteer for aid work in Syria. Let us assume that she cannot know what the experience will be like and how she will be changed

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<sup>7</sup> The normative content of values, relationships and roles is socio-culturally relative. Thus, what it means to be, say, a good parent will differ across various geographical and temporal contexts. Furthermore, there is always a certain amount of leeway in terms of how a role or identity is interpreted (social norms are always open to interpretation). Thus, one can inhabit a role or an identity in various ways. However, this must stay within limits to be recognisable *as* that role or identity.

by it. Nevertheless, she does know that she values being a doctor and that it is important to her to help people in need. To value something is, at least in part, to see that thing as valuable and hence to want to act in appropriate ways toward the thing of value (Scheffler, 2004). Thus, to value friendship is to take oneself as having reasons to act in ways that are supportive of / required by the concept itself. Someone who claims to value friendship, but who never responds to his friends' requests for help, is either deeply mistaken about the meaning of "friendship" or lying to himself and/or others. Thus, to value X is not just to derive pleasure from X, but also to be committed to acting, and to want to act, in appropriate ways in relation to X. To quote Scanlon, 'A person who values friendship will take herself to have reasons, first and foremost, to do those things that are involved in being a good friend: to be loyal, to be concerned with her friend's interests, to try to stay in touch, to spend time with her friends, and so on' (Scanlon, 1998, p. 88).

Importantly, meeting the normative requirements that valuing imposes on us does not involve consideration of what it will be like, experientially, for us to do so. For example, assume that I value friendship. Being a good friend will require me to forego watching a football match on television because my friend's mother has died and she needs some company. To decide between the alternatives – "watch the football game" and "comfort my friend" – I do not 'project forward and evaluate different possible acts and their outcomes', as Paul recommends we deliberate when deciding what to do (Paul, 2014, p. 26). Rather, I choose to stay with my friend because that is what it means to be a good friend. I need not make this choice – I could decide to have the more pleasurable experience of watching football – but so

long as I *want* to be a good friend and *identify* myself as such, then I have strong reasons to decide to comfort my friend.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to Julia, we can see that, if she values being a doctor and helping people in need, then she has good reason to go to Syria, regardless of what it will be *like* to work in Syria. Her identification with being a doctor provides normative guidance and justification for her choice. This is disconnected from the subjective experiential value of the possible outcomes she is faced with. Importantly, her deliberation is still conducted from the first-personal perspective. She does not invoke objective moral requirements or political imperatives. She is considering her agent-relative reasons that arise because of what *she* cares about. She is also considering possible outcomes to choose between. Thus, she envisions what the future might be like, but she does not invoke its experiential quality in assigning value to the outcomes. An outcome's worth derives from its connection with what she values and the type of person she wants to be, rather than what it will be like to *experience*.

Indeed, if Julia is wholeheartedly committed to being a doctor and to helping people in need, then she may not stop to calculate what she ought to do. Rather, perhaps after seeing television footage of the immense suffering being experienced by the people of Syria, she simply begins to make travel arrangements. This could represent a “volitional necessity”, in which one is compelled to act in a certain way because of what one cares about / values. To quote Frankfurt: ‘There are occasions when a person realizes that what he cares about matters to him not merely so much, but in such a way, that it is impossible for him to forebear from a certain course of action’ (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 86).

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, to calculate whether I should comfort my friend or watch football could be, as Williams put it, to have ‘one thought too many’ (Williams, 1981, p. 18).

Frankfurt gives the example of Luther's declaration that, "Here I stand; I can do no other". His being unable to act otherwise does not derive from some external force, but rather from Luther's internal value system. Because of his commitments and beliefs, 'every apparent alternative to that course is unthinkable' (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 86). One's practical identity can take courses of action off the deliberative table, as it were, because of the strength of what one cares about: 'To the extent that a person is constrained by volitional necessities, there are certain things that he cannot help willing or that he cannot bring himself to do' (Frankfurt, 1999, p. 114). The relevant point is that the decision to pursue a course of action, even if it is likely to be transformative, can be based on who one is now, rather than on what the future experience will be like.<sup>9</sup> Luther need not contemplate the *consequences* of his action to be sure that he must decide as he does; what it will be like to experience the consequences is irrelevant to him, even when deliberating from his first-personal perspective.

We can see how one's practical identity can be the basis for choosing to have a child. When making this decision, I can reflect on what reasons my endorsed practical identity provides me with (e.g. what I value in life, the kind of person I am and the commitments that I have). Do I value organising my days as I see fit, spending a lot of time on my own, regularly travelling to other countries, sleeping in until lunchtime at the weekends and/or dedicating myself to my career? If so, then these values provide me with reasons against becoming a parent. Conversely, do I value family life, doing nice things for other people, caring for them and/or spending time in the company of others? If so, then these values provide me with reasons in favour of becoming a parent. Such considerations about what I value in life and the

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<sup>9</sup> Along similar lines, Kaupinnen (2015) argues that one ought to make life choices in a "story-regarding" rather than an "experience-regarding" manner; that is, on the basis of how one's choices fit into a wider life narrative about who one is, rather than what one's future experiences will be like.

features of my personality that I endorse do much of the necessary justificatory work when deciding to have a child. They render my decision a rational one, even though I cannot know how I will be changed by having a child and what its subjective experiential value will be. To quote Chang:

What matters in such a choice is not getting the objectively and subjectively best experience. Having a good experience is relevant to the choice, but the choice about whether to have a child is primarily one about whether to bring a being into your life and into the world, not about what you are to *experience* (Chang, 2015, p. 261).

It may be objected that my remarks misunderstand Paul's argument and the challenge it poses for first-personal rational deliberation. Paul acknowledges that some people like caring for others, whilst other people have never had an interest in parenthood, which provides reasons for and against procreating respectively. Part of the problem she identifies is that TEs can *change* one's values and preferences. For example, the person who has always valued playing with and looking after other people's children may find that they do not value having their own child. Accordingly, one cannot use one's current practical identity as a guide to deciding between possible outcomes involving TEs, because one's identity can be changed through the experience itself. Thus, I cannot know which decision will best satisfy what I value or care about most, because I cannot know what my post-TE values and preferences will be. This may undermine the practical identity account as a solution to Paul's challenge.

In response, one can ask why it should matter to me, when deliberating about a choice I am making *now*, that my values and preferences may change *later* in ways that I can neither



control nor predict (at least with any degree of certainty). It matters for Paul because she construes such deliberation in terms of imagining what it will be like to have the experience and the value this experience will have for me, which can only be determined by ascribing values and preferences to my future self. However, it will not matter to someone who is unconcerned, or even only relatively unconcerned, with what the experiential nature of an outcome will be. This person will want to ensure that their decision *reflects* their current values and preferences, irrespective of what future values and preferences they may have. What matters to them will be the *realisation* of their values through their actions.

This does not mean that the person is dismissive of, or entirely inattentive to, the future and how their decisions will affect them. On the contrary, we have projects, hopes, wishes and plans that are necessarily future-oriented. We seek to realise our values through pursuing these projects and plans. We make decisions, such as to study philosophy or to apply for law school, that shape who we are and, hopefully, result in our being a certain kind of person in the future (a philosophy teacher; a judge). However, what matters is who we are *now* – which includes our plans and preferences for who we will be in the future – and how the future relates to our *current* sense of self. We need not invoke a possible, altered future self that will experience and evaluate these experiences in ways quite different to who we are and who we want to be (assuming, again, that we can neither know nor control whether such a self will come into existence). Rather, we need only invoke a future self that extends out from – a future self that is the realisation of – our current self.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> We may still think it desirable if agents are flexible in terms of responding to unforeseen and unchosen alterations in their identity. I might deeply want to become a doctor and play my life accordingly, but discover (much to my and other people's surprise) that I find life as a doctor wholly unrewarding and unenjoyable. Alternatively, perhaps I did enjoy being a doctor but am now entirely alienated from such a life. It would then be appropriate to revise my sense of self and my future plans in response to these changes in self.

The reason that many people care about acting with *integrity* is because they want to act in ways that are consistent with who they are, regardless of an outcome's experiential value and effect on the self (see McFall, 1987). As Taylor writes, 'I have integrity to the degree to which my actions and statements are true expressions of what is really of importance to me. It is their *intrinsic* character as revelations or expressions that count, not their *consequences*' (Taylor, 1982, p. 144; emphasis added). One can act with integrity by ensuring one's behaviour is in accordance with one's endorsed practical identity. If one really does value something, or is genuinely committed to a cause or a social role, then one should act in ways required by that value, commitment or role, rather than focusing primarily on (and being swayed by) what the experiential consequences of their action will be.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, worrying too much about a decision's experiential value, or how one will be changed by it, may even detract from or threaten one's integrity, if this is construed as indicating a lack of commitment to one's values, projects or commitments.

Thus far, I have sought to show that one's endorsed practical identity provides the normative resources to make a transformative choice in a rational manner, even when one is deliberating first-personally and asking oneself, "What do *I* want to do?". Insofar as one identifies with elements of one's practical identity, then it provides reasons for action that can determine what one should do, regardless of the consequences or future experiential value of the decision. If this is right, then it challenges the strong version of Paul's solution. Choosing for the sake of revelation is not the only way that one can or should choose to undergo a TE, even when deliberating first-personally. This means that the weak version must be endorsed.

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<sup>11</sup> For example, an activist may choose to go on hunger strike because they think it is the best means to further their political cause, to which they are deeply committed, even though the decision will be experientially unpleasant and hence of low / negative experiential value.

The weak version states that, when faced with a TE, *if* I want to make the decision based upon its experiential value, then I cannot do this by imagining what the experience of the outcome will be like and must instead choose on the basis of revelation. On the weak version, the revelation account is compatible with the practical identity account because they concern different methods of deliberation. Thus, my argument does not refute the weak version. Rather, it shows that a full solution to the problem of TEs must include both the role of one's practical identity and Paul's revelation account.

Consider, for example, someone who is thinking of becoming a soldier because she is interested in experiencing what a real battle is like. She wants to know what it will be like for her to experience fighting at close quarters. She is not realising some deeply-held value, project or commitment, such as a strong sense of patriotism or a familial tradition of serving in the armed forces. She simply has a strong desire to know first-personally what war is like. I will assume, for the sake of argument, that serving as a soldier and fighting in a war is likely to be personally transformative. This means that Paul's challenge applies: the person cannot know beforehand what it will be like to experience being in combat and how it will affect her preferences, and so she cannot assign it a subjective experiential value. Furthermore, she cannot look to her practical identity for guidance because all she is interested in is the experience itself and whether it is worth it. In this case, Paul's revelation method can be employed. The person can choose on the basis of having the experience itself.

Accepting the weak version leaves us with the challenge of choosing between these competing methods and the reasons for action they generate. There may be significant disagreement or uncertainty about what transformative decisions are, and should be, made for

the sake of revelation and what decisions are best made by reflecting on one's practical identity. For example, if someone wanted to become a soldier or a doctor simply to find out what this life would be like, we might think that their decision-making lacked, for want of a better word, "depth". Career choices are a central feature of one's life-plans and projects, which both reflect and shape who one is and the life that one leads. Thus, we may well expect a person to choose their career based on their core values and preferences, rather than simply for the sake of finding out what such a life will be like for them to experience.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the two methods are not mutually exclusive. Instead of choosing between them, I may instead weigh up the reasons for action that both revelation and my practical identity provide. Many of us make decisions by invoking and weighing up different relevant reasons, especially with regard to significant life choices. However, there remains the difficulty of determining how much weight to assign to revelation-reasons and to practical identity-reasons respectively, especially if they suggest different courses of action. If we think that choosing to become a doctor or deciding to have a baby solely on the basis of revelation will lack depth, then it is unlikely that this worry will dissipate if other reasons are included but are given very little weight compared to revelation. Even choosing primarily, but not exclusively, on the basis of revelation might be questionable when deliberating about TEs such as career changes and parenthood. The worry is that for many TEs, choosing to undergo them for the sake of revelation is going to look like the wrong kind of reason to base one's decision on. This is especially the case with transformative choices that have important ethical dimensions to them, as I will explain in the next section.

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<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, this assumes that people have the material and educational resources, as well as the requisite talents, to choose a career based on what they most value and enjoy. Many people's work choices are dictated by economic necessity and social circumstance. My discussion here concerns what is normatively desirable, free from practical constraints.

### **Justifying one's choice: the ethics of self-transformation**

I have argued that Paul's revelation argument cannot provide a complete solution to the problem of TEs. It must be bolstered with an account of decision-making grounded in one's practical identity. In addition, choosing to undergo a TE on the basis of revelation can, at times, be challenged on ethical grounds. To see why, consider the decision to have a child. Recall that, on Paul's account, 'if you choose to have a child, your choice is to discover the new experiences and new preferences of a parent, whatever they will be' (Paul, 2014, p. 119). Recall also that Paul's account is normative: it is about how one *ought* to deliberate (Paul, 2014, p. 20). Her argument, then, is that, if one wants to choose to have a child (or to undergo some other TE) using the standard model of subjective rational deliberation, which is grounded in imagining what the future experience will be like, then one can only and should only do so on the basis of revelation. Thus, the revelation approach is offered by Paul as an important way, perhaps even the main way, to make major life-choices.

However, if one were to ask an expectant mother why she became pregnant (assuming it was done voluntarily), then I do not think that we should be satisfied if her response is, "I wanted to discover what it would be like to be a parent". If her answer is to be ethically acceptable, then we require her to make some reference to the belief that she would make a good parent, that she wanted to care for and to love a human being, that she was in a suitable position to do so (e.g. has sufficient financial resources) and/or that it was something that her partner

also wanted.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, one should not choose to get married or move in with one's partner purely for the sake of revelation. Rather, one should do so because one is in love or for some such suitable, other-regarding reason. If one's partner asked, "why did you marry me?" or "why did you agree to move in with me?", then responding with "to find out what it would be like" is not the kind of justification that would, or should, be acceptable to them.<sup>14</sup> There is nothing wrong with revelation playing *a* part in one's deliberative process about decisions such as these. Someone may be genuinely curious to know what being a parent or moving in with a partner will be like. However, this consideration should have at most a relatively small role in their decision-making.

Shupe objects that Paul's solution is problematic when applied to cases involving decisions that primarily affect another person (Shupe, 2016). She discusses Paul's own example of choosing to give a cochlear implant to one's child. On Paul's revelation approach, the way to decide rationally whether or not to give one's child a cochlear implant is to determine what the value of revelation has *for you*. This, Shupe complains, overlooks the fact that what is of primary importance in this decision is what it will be like *for the child* to have the implant.<sup>15</sup> Paul's solution fails to treat the child's outcome as the most relevant one to the decision process. However, Shupe suggests that the majority of Paul's other cases, such as choosing to have a child and changing career, are immune from this worry. This is because in such cases the main person affected by the decision is the person making it and hence the question of

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<sup>13</sup> This remains true even if the effect on her of having the child transforms her in a way that makes her a poor mother (such as if she suffered from very severe postnatal depression). We still want her to have acted for ethically acceptable reasons at the time of deliberation.

<sup>14</sup> The same point is made by Chan (2016, p. 285). However, the topic of Chan's discussion, and the conclusions drawn, are very different to this paper's.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the decision to transform others, see Howard (2015)

what value revelation has for them is appropriate. Hence, Shupe seems to allow that one can adopt Paul's solution when deliberating about changing oneself.

I agree that the revelation approach is inappropriate for choosing to give one's child a cochlear implant. However, unlike Schupe, I also worry that it is inappropriate for many of Paul's other central examples, at least if it is the sole or main consideration that guides one's decision. One reason for this is because changing oneself often has a significant effect on people one cares about. One's decision to have a child impacts other people, not just the future child but also one's partner and existing family. Thus, when deciding to procreate, it matters *why* one chooses to do so (Lotz, 2011). We may want to be able to justify our choice to our child when it is older and one's partner and family may reasonably expect us to be able to offer ethically-acceptable, other-regarding reasons for choosing to have a child (and I have listed such reasons above). I am suggesting that "to find out what it was like" is not such a reason.

This claim applies to other TEs, such as changing career, moving to a new country or changing one's sex/gender. Basing these decisions solely, or even primarily, on the value of revelation ignores, or gives too little weight to, the commitments and obligations that underpin one's loving relationships. Thus, the revelation approach, when taken in isolation as a sufficient method for deciding what to do, or when given much greater weighting than other relevant reasons, may provide a rational justification for choosing to have a TE at the cost of an ethically acceptable one. Importantly, focusing on one's practical identity will help to avoid this problem. Deciding to marry someone because I love them, or to have a child because I value family life, reflects who I am and are the sorts of reasons I could offer to my partner and children – they are the sorts of reasons that would be acceptable to them.

It is useful to consider what has been said thus far in the light of Arvan's response to Paul's work.<sup>16</sup> Arvan argues that, if Paul's challenge stands, then the most rational way for people to approach TEs is to develop "resilience", that is, 'a general ability to navigate life psychologically, socially, culturally, and physically in ways that sustain their own personal well-being... to not be defeated by negative life events, and to deal with them in productive rather than unproductive ways' (Arvan, 2015, pp. 1207–8). Thus, if one cannot know what an outcome will be like and how it will change one as a person, then one can at least develop the sort of personality that will respond positively to the outcome *whatever* it happens to be like. Being resilient will make it more likely that one will respond better to the outcome, and have a more positive experience of it, than someone who is non-resilient.

Nevertheless, it would be problematic if one made one's decision solely *in order* to develop resilience. One should not have a child or marry a partner because it will make one more resilient. (Again, imagine asking your partner to marry you so you can increase your resilience). As with revelation, resilience should not be the only basis on which a first-personal decision is made. It is relevant to one's decision making, but should not be taken as a motivational reason. Rather, one's being resilient will help one to realise one's existing, appropriate practical reasons. Indeed, it will often increase the robustness or effectiveness of the reasons one's endorsed identity provides.

To see why, imagine that Mary is deciding whether to have a child. She does not know what it will be like for her to experience parenthood, but she knows she loves her partner and values caring for others. Thus, she has good reasons to have a child. If Mary is also resilient,

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<sup>16</sup> I am very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for several of the points that follow and for correcting my discussion of Arvan's account.



then she is more likely to cope with the potential pressures, stresses and life-changes associated with parenthood. In turn, this is likely to ensure a better relationship with her partner, as she will be less stressed, exhausted or overwhelmed by parenthood. Being resilient will help to make Mary's reasons effective / fulfilled. She will be able to "live up to" or "realise" her endorsed practical identity, that is, what she values and cares about. Thus, approaching TEs through the concept of resilience can fit well with the practical identity approach I have outlined.

There is one final observation to make about the role of revelation and resilience in one's decision-making and their relationship to one's practical identity.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes, one may be deeply ambivalent about a decision and/or unclear about what choice would best reflect who one is. Perhaps one values family life and caring for others, but one also values travelling and spending time on one's own. Thus, one may be genuinely uncertain about whether to have a child in the light of one's practical identity. One feels deeply torn between one's various values, projects and commitments, which give good reasons both for and against parenthood. In such a scenario, one may appeal to revelation and/or resilience as a "decider" or "tie-breaker". If one values having novel experiences, or if one knows that one is very resilient and often makes the best of things, then one may use this knowledge to resolve one's uncertainty. Although having a child purely or primarily for the sake of revelation or developing resilience are not good reasons, revelation and resilience could be good reasons for choosing between two options that are both well supported by one's values, commitments, projects and the like.

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<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this issue.

## Conclusion

We are often faced with significant life choices that will change who we are. Many of these choices will be personally and epistemically transformative: before making them, we cannot what they will be like for us to experience and how they will alter us. Paul argues that, if we want to decide to undergo a TE based on its subjective experiential value, then we can only do so on the basis of revelation. I have argued that (a) revelation should not be the means by which we make a transformative choice; (b) for many TEs, revelation should play little or no role in our decision-making. This applies even when we are deliberating first-personally. We should often base our decisions primarily on what those features of our practical identity that we endorse commit us to; we should base our decisions on what we value and care about.

Rather than refute Paul's solution, I have argued that it can only form part of a complete account of decision-making about TEs. Thus, I have tried to show that such deliberation is complex, more complex than much current discussion of TEs and rational deliberation makes out, and involves balancing a variety of different reasons. What this means is that deciding to undergo a TE should involve more than the value of revelation. It should also include reasons relating to our practical identity and our ethical relationships with others. The value of revelation can be invoked when making a decision, but it is important to appreciate its appropriate weighting in relation to other relevant reasons.

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