§1 Epistemic and Personally Transformative Experiences

*Epistemically transformative experience* = “a kind of experience that teaches [you] something [you] could not have learned without having that kind of experience.” (p. 11)

E.g., what it is like to eat Durian fruit; see colors; sky dive.

*Personal transformative experience* = the sort of experience “that can change who you are, in the sense of radically changing your point of view (rather than only slightly modifying your preferences)” (p. 15)

E.g., having a child; suffering trauma; becoming a vampire; gaining a new sensory ability.

→ Paul is concerned with experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative.

§2 Subjective Values

Subjective value of an experience = the value that derives from having that (veridical) experience

You need to know what having an experience is like to know its subjective value:

Since the subjective value of an experience derives from what it’s like to have that experience, to know, at least approximately, the subjective value of an experience, you must know what it’s like to have that type of experience. (p. 14)

A common view is that (setting aside considerations of morality and other objective values), we often make decisions between options based on the subjective values we attach to the relevant experiences.

Paul’s question: What normative constraints govern these subjective value decisions?

§3 Realistic Normative Decision-Making

Realistic normative decision theory prescribes what decisions people they ought to make in real-life circumstances.

Rational decision-making = maximise expected utility

The expected utility of an action is the value the agent attaches to each possible outcome weight by the credence the agent attaches to the outcome conditional on the action.

Presupposition: We must have sufficient evidence of our credences and values about certain outcomes.

Paradigm of subjective life decisions:

[W]e approach many major life decisions as personal matters where a central feature of what is at stake is what it will be like for us to experience the outcomes of our acts, and where the subjective value we assign to an outcome depends upon what we care about, whatever that might be. (p. 25)
Cognitive simulation:

When you are considering your options, you evaluate each possible act and its experiential outcomes by imaging or running a mental simulation of what it would be like, should you act, for each relevant possible outcome of each relevant act. You simulate the relevant possible outcomes for yourself, that is, you simulate what it would be like for you to have each of these experiences. (p. 26)

But what if you do not know what an experience would be like for you?

Standard models of decision-making give us a way of assigning credences to outcomes in cases of where the values of the outcomes are given. But what if you do not know what value you ought to assign to an outcome because you do not know what it would be like for you to experience it?

§4 Transformative Decisions

Decisions that involve transformative experience pose special problems for the standard model of rational decisions because

(i) you cannot determine the subjective value of the relevant outcomes; and
(ii) your preferences might change due to the experience and so the pre-decision subjective values might not adequately reflect your post-decisions values.

§5 The Case of Cochlear Implants

Deaf parents cannot properly assess the value their children would receive from hearing because they do not know the value of the experience and how it would shape the children's perspective.

Advocates of implants cannot properly assess the unique sensory experience of being deaf and value of being a deaf member of the Deaf community.

[S]hedding light on the transformative nature of the choice can allow us to cast doubt on how parents can be expected to rationally evaluate these arguments about the value of future experience, for such arguments may implicitly require parents to ascribe values to experiences and to assess preference changes that they lack epistemic access to. (p. 62)

§6 The Case of choosing to have a Child

You cannot properly assess the subjective value it would have for you to have a child due to the transformative nature of the experience

→ decision to have (or not have) a child is, according to the standard model, not a rational decision.

[If] you've never had a child, it is impossible to make an informed, rational decision by imagining what it would be like to have your child, assigning subjective values to outcomes, and then modeling your preferences on this basis. (p. 83)

Alternative ways of making decisions
- based on non-subjective values (e.g., to have an heir)
- based on scientific evidence
But this would mean to disregard your own personal experience in the choice about your future

Paul's proposal: choose to have an experience because of the value you place on finding out what it is like, rather than the (unknown) value of having the experience.