

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND HOW TO LIVE LIFE TO THE
FULLEST WHILE KEEPING IT RATIONAL

Öykü Ulusoy

Research Master Thesis by Öykü Ulusoy
ECTS Credits: 30
Supervisor: Dr. Conrad Heilmann
Advisor: Dr. Christopher Clarke
Date of Completion: 15/07/2018
Word Count: Circa 24689

Erasmus Institute for Philosophy and Economics
Erasmus University Rotterdam

ABSTRACT

How can individuals compare alternative futures to make rational life-changing decisions when they cannot foresee how the aftermath of their decision might change their tastes and preferences? In *Transformative Experience*, Laurie Paul (2014) argues that some experiences in life cause epistemic and personal transformation to the extent that their outcomes fundamentally affect individuals' tastes and deliberations, and even change their selves. Paul identifies two problems that transformative experiences pose for decision-makers. When making choices about such experiences, individuals cannot first-personally imagine what the experience *is like* to make informed evaluations regarding their taste for it and have an 'information problem'. Secondly, they cannot make judgments about their post-experience self at the time of the decision to choose between their current and future selves, which have different preference sets so they have a 'preference-change problem'. Due to these two problems, individuals cannot follow decision-theoretic rules of evaluation to build a rational and complete preference-order for alternative futures. Nevertheless, Paul suggests that to make transformative decisions in accordance with the normative standard of rationality, people can decide whether they prefer the *revelation* of the new experiences and new selves entailed.

This thesis aims to address the role of revelation—i.e. 'the preference for discovery of new experiences' in solving the problems that are caused by transformative experiences in a way that the decision-makers can still apply the normative standard of rationality. Accordingly, I first discuss Paul's suggestions and then engage with the critics of Paul who propose their own solutions to make informed transformative choices and to compare alternative futures. I argue that the revelation strategy, by and large, fails to solve the problems of transformative experiences in accordance with the normative standard of rationality. In terms of the information problem, the revelation strategy does not incorporate enough experience-specific factors that individuals may need to make their decisions. Regarding the preference-change problem, having a taste for the discovery of new experiences alone is not sufficient to develop higher-order preferences to change one's current preferences and to discriminate between various transformative experiences. The critical engagement with the debates on Transformative Experience also fails to yield satisfying suggestions to improve the revelation strategy in a way that it can fulfil Paul's project.

Key words: Transformative Experiences, Life-Changing Decisions, Preference Change, Epistemic Transformation, Personal Transformation, Revelation Strategy, Revelatory Value, Rational Choice, Decision Theory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Conrad Heilmann for all the support and assistance that he shared so generously in the writing of this thesis and in developing my research project for the future. I would like to thank Christopher Clarke for his guidance as my advisor. I would like to thank Anne Albert van der Galiën and Manon Dillen for the numerous discussions we had about our theses and about life in general. I would like to thank Daphne Truijens for the precious comments she shared in my thesis presentation. I would further like to express my gratitude to the members of the EIPÉ, especially to Constanze Binder for her guidance as my tutor, and to the students for the years we spent together. I would like to thank Christopher McLaren as well for agreeing to proofread my thesis on such short notice. I would like to thank Ararat Şekeryan for coming to aid last minute. Finally, I would like to thank Mau for his endless support and perfect coffees. I dedicate this thesis to my dad, to whom I promised to dedicate my second thesis. Here you go, Dad, I love you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Research Question.....	1
1.2 Literature Review.....	2
1.2.1 Transformative Experience by Laurie Paul.....	2
1.2.2 Critical response to Transformative Experience.....	4
1.3 Arguments of the Thesis.....	6
1.4 Structure of the Chapters.....	8
2. TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND HOW TO MAKE LIFE-CHANGING DECISIONS	10
2.1 Would You Like to Become a Vampire?	10
2.2 Transformative Experiences and Their Impact on Our Selves.....	12
2.2.1 Epistemic Transformation and Personal Transformation.....	12
2.2.2 Real-Life Transformative Experiences.....	13
2.3 Two Problems of Transformative Experiences.....	15
2.3.1 The information problem.....	15
2.3.2 The role of subjective values	16
2.3.3 The role of external information.....	17
2.3.4 The preference-change problem.....	19
2.4 Decision-theoretic Guidance to Make Rational Transformative Decisions.....	20
2.4.1 The limits of making rational transformative decisions.....	20
2.4.2 Revelatory value of new experiences and an alternative strategy.....	23
2.5 Where to Go from Here: A Discussion on Revelation.....	26
2.5.1 What is missing in the revelation strategy.....	26
2.5.2 Evaluating revelation for preference-change	29
2.5.3 What is next?	31
3. CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MAKING TRANSFORMATIVE CHOICES WITH THE REVELATION STRATEGY	33
3.1 Critical Response to Transformative Experience.....	34
3.2 Gathering Information Under Epistemic Uncertainty.....	36
3.2.1 The case of Mystery Box and testimonial evidence.....	36
3.2.2 Partial knowledge and alternative transformative decision formations.....	39
3.2.3 Critical reflections on the discussion points.....	41
3.2.4 The use of external information in deliberating the revelatory value.....	44
3.3 Deciding on the Value of Preference-Change	46
3.3.1 A different perspective on the preference-change problem.....	47
3.3.2 Preserving one’s preferences or cognitive impairment.....	48
3.3.3 A suggestion for future research.....	50
3.4 Final Remarks: Where Does This Leave the Revelation Strategy?	52
4. CONCLUSION	54
5. BIBLIOGRAPHY	60

*“But how did I murder her? Is that how men do murders? Do men go to commit a murder as I went then? I will tell you some day how I went! Did I murder the old woman? I murdered myself, not her! I crushed myself once for all, for ever.... But it was the devil that killed that old woman, not I. Enough, enough, Sonia, enough! Let me be!’ he cried in a sudden spasm of agony, ‘let me be!’” (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*)*

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Question

If at one point in your life technology advances enough to allow a spaceship to leave earth and to search for new planets, will you volunteer to join its crew? How do you commit to discovering new planets rationally while being aware that you do not know what to expect even if you know that you have a strong interest in astronautics? What if your future self becomes overwhelmed by the whole journey and regrets leaving your current life to pursue a path full of uncertainties? On the other side, whose preferences should matter the most to you when making your decision, the future self that supposedly would appreciate the choices you are making now or your current self who has numerous interests and desires waiting to be fulfilled? To present a more realistic version of the dilemma; whose preferences you need to take into account the most to make rational life choices, the fifteen-year-old self who wants to spend her life travelling the world and discovering other cultures, or the self who builds a family and finds herself only having taste for her children's wellbeing?

The aim of this thesis is to discuss how to make life-changing decisions with regard to Laurie Paul's *Transformative Experience* and to investigate whether 'the value of revelation' can have a role in making our deliberations regarding our future lives normatively rational. Thus, my general research question can be summarized as such: What is the role of the value one assigns to the discovery of new experiences in solving the problems caused by transformative experiences? I argue that with respect to Paul's arguments about the two problems of transformative experiences and the revelation strategy, revelatory value, by and large, is inadequate to be configured as a decision strategy to provide guidelines on how to make life-changing decisions rationally.

Although I argue that Paul's idea fails to deliver a decision-theoretically applicable strategy, engaging with the critical response to *Transformative Experience* can elaborate further on how to handle transformative experiences, which can offer insights to use revelation to make transformative choices. Hence, we arrive at the specific research question: Can the debates on transformative experiences help to reconfigure the revelation strategy in a way that the revelatory value can have a role in making rational transformative decisions? For the specific research question, I put forth that with respect to the points of

commentators, using external information to judge the value of discovery can be one plausible way to reconfigure the revelation strategy—as can be different contexts to make transformative choices—to solve the information problem of some of them. Nevertheless, I show that the attempt to improve the revelation strategy in this way also fails to develop a satisfying strategy to resolve the preference-change problem.

The conclusion of the thesis is that the decision-theoretic configurations based on revelatory value fall short of suggesting how to rationally make life-changing decisions. That being said, the revelation strategy offers a certain level of practical significance to inform decision-makers about one aspect of their decisions. Overall, it fails to produce a standard for rational evaluation of personal transformation and preference-change. Taste for discovery alone is not a sufficient basis on which one can judge whether or not to undergo an experience that will fundamentally transform one's own self, preferences, and future expectations.

The next section offers a first look at the literature and the relevant discussion points to the research questions.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Transformative Experience by Laurie Paul

In *Transformative Experiences* (2014), Paul discusses two modes of transformation that limit a person's access to his/her future states. Firstly, there is epistemic transformation, which occurs when people learn something new via experience (p.10), such as seeing a colour for the first time. After the first experience, the phenomenological knowledge of seeing a colour is revealed and transforms one's epistemic perspective. The second type of transformation is personal transformation. When the knowledge that a new experience reveals is too striking, it changes *the self* by changing tastes, priorities, perspectives, and opinions—the core components on which individuals base their preferences and decisions (p.16). Paul underlines that in many cases dramatic epistemic transformation results in personal transformation; so, an experience becomes both personally and epistemically transformative. She names those simply as *transformative experience*¹ and identifies them as the focus of her study (p.17). The importance of such experiences is that they play a central role in shaping individuals' futures and in that sense can be life-changing

¹The terms transformative choice and transformative decision are also meant to address both personally and epistemically transformative choices/decisions (Paul, 2015c, p.476).

experiences.² The life-changing experience Paul most frequently discusses is becoming a parent.

Paul identifies two problems posed by transformative experiences that prevent individuals from making rational decisions. One problem is that individuals' first-personal perspective is not invariant under epistemic transformation (Paul, 2015c, p.474). Learning something new through experience can fundamentally alter people's future selves and in particular preferences, while they cannot grasp the nature of the transformation before undergoing it. While they cannot know who they are making themselves to be, they cannot know whether they prefer to be transformed in that way. Neither do they know how much their current tastes and preferences should be taken into account for their future regarding choices. Consequently, they cannot rationally compare alternative sets of preferences and values to choose the best alternative to shape their futures (p.475). We will refer to this problem as *the preference-change problem*.

The other problem is that individuals know very little about their possible futures, and as undergoing a transformative experience would cause dramatic and fundamental changes in their lives, no matter how much they try to learn about its outcomes, they will face a hurdle in making informed decisions with regard to their subjective values (Paul, 2014, p.2). We will refer to this problem as *the information problem*.

Here, what Paul means by subjective value is 'experientially grounded values' (Paul, 2015c, p.477-478). These values are about 'what it is like' to have a particular experience and knowing the phenomenological character of that experience. It is necessary for individuals to have an experience before so that they can first-personally imagine/project the outcomes of that experience in order to assign the subjective values of those outcomes and to form their preferences regarding the experience. According to Paul (2015c, p.481-483), there is no external information that can take the place of first-personal evaluations; there is only, to an extent, "descriptive information about possible subjective values". Decision-makers need to weight the information they gather while interpreting it in the context of their individual case, so that they can make *personal* decisions. However, they cannot comprehend the phenomenological character of new experiences to determine whether they have a taste for them with regard to external information. They also cannot know how their post-experience selves would be like to weigh the external information for that self.

² In this thesis, I sometimes substitute transformative experiences as life-changing experiences and likewise transformative choices/decisions as life-changing choices/decisions.

Paul argues that decision theories seriously overlook the problems that she identifies. However, because of them, the normative standard of rationality cannot be satisfied when making life-changing decisions (Paul, 2015a, p.162-165). As life-changing decisions involve epistemically and personally transformative aspects that prevent decision-makers to first-personally grasp the phenomenological character of new experiences, they cannot determine which of their alternatives would yield the best possible outcome. Even if decision-makers could somehow predict some positive aspects of the outcomes, they cannot weigh those aspects against others to estimate the degree of the wellbeing that any given outcome would bring. Accordingly, Paul states that “if we want to use normative decision theory as a guide for rational transformative choice”, we need to rethink how to make the decisions regarding our futures, and develop new decision models to handle transformation, i.e., new directions for research (Paul, 2014, p.178).

Paul suggests that embracing the value of experience for experience’s sake should be part of the solution and “we should choose rationality plus revelation” when “we simply do not have epistemic access to the subjective values of our future lived experiences”. The idea is that—even if the value of the outcomes of a life-changing decision is inaccessible, as that future state is unknown—decision-makers can assign a subjective value to whether they want to discover (p.120). Essentially, Paul argues that we need to reconfigure the decision structure in a way that one does not try to grasp his/her taste for new experiences but bases his/her decision on whether he/she wants to discover the phenomenological character of new experiences. According to Paul, epistemic transformation problems can be solved under this configuration. In terms of personally transformative cases, Paul admits that subjective value of revelation is not enough to rationally choose to undergo a life-changing experience, as in the case of personal transformation, one’s taste for revelation of new experiences is also subject to change. To solve this problem, Paul suggests that one also values the revelation of the new self, who comes with new preferences such that he/she develops a higher-order preference to choose to change his/her current preferences. Paul argues that in this structure, choosing revelation becomes a rational decision based on first-personal assessment (p.3), which is in accordance with normative models and solves the problems of transformative experiences in a decision-theoretical way.

1.2.2 Critical response to *Transformative Experience*

The responses to *Transformative Experience* can be divided into three groups, following the respective main topic of debate. The first group focuses on definitional questions and

critically analyses a variety of life-changing experiences with regard to the framework provided by Paul (Zelcer, 2015 [war]; McKinnon, 2015 [gender transition]; Velji, 2015 [religious transformation]; Carel et al., 2016 [illness]). The second group defends the standard approach and objects to Paul's critique of decision theories. This group attempts to conceive of transformative experiences in a manner to demonstrate that they do not threaten the formal framework of decision theory (Bykvist and Stefánsson, 2017; Pettigrew, 2015; Carr, 2015). The third group argues that the problems posed by transformative choices are not unsolvable. They generally problematize the lack of emphasis on external information in Paul's account and argue that scientific and testimonial data play a crucial role in the deliberation process of individuals regarding new experiences (Kauppinen, 2015; Harman, 2015; Dougherty, Horowitz & Sliwa, 2015; Friedman, 2015; Chang, 2015; Campbell, 2015).

Bearing in mind the two problems resultant from transformative experiences, as well as my research questions, I focus on the third group of commentators, who examine how either information or preference-change problem can be solved, and therefore, engage in the debates most relevant to the study at hand. From this group, I will highlight the discussions regarding the information problem from two commentators, Harman (2015) and Dougherty, et al. (2015). Harman first suggests that testimony is a relevant source of information and goes on to share a paradigmatic example, 'the Mystery box,' to illustrate her points. She then examines how to use testimony to assign subjective values to transformative experiences. Finally, she discusses the problems that might occur when one relies on testimonial evidence. Dougherty, et al. (2015) agree with Paul in regards to the preference-change problem but argue that epistemic transformation can be dealt with if one has sufficient relevant information to make a rational decision. Accordingly, they consider how to make use of partial knowledge not concerning the phenomenological character in order to make informed epistemically transformative decisions, as well as elaborate on different ways of undergoing transformative experiences.

I will focus on Barnes' account (2015) for its reflections about the preference-change problem, which illustrates strong arguments for remaining in one's current state and rejecting transformation. She makes her case against the revelation value by arguing that people can rationally choose to continue as who they are if change would mean violation of their current values and self-identity. They do not need an evaluation based on the value of discovery to be able to make this judgment rationally.

The next section will present the arguments and findings of the thesis.

1.3 Arguments of the Thesis

The aim of this thesis is to study the value of revelation and whether there can be a revelation strategy to solve the two problems of transformative experiences, so that transformative decisions can be made in accordance with the normative standard of rationality. Paul argues that due to the problems of transformative experiences, decision-makers cannot apply decision-theoretic strategies to make rational transformative choices, though she proposes that reconfiguring transformative decisions with regard to the revelatory value of new experiences is one possible solution to this issue. Paul's account details the ways in which normative and standard decision theories fail to suggest how to make life-changing decisions rationally and in this thesis it is argued that the alternative configuration based on the value of revelation also fails.

I proceed with my argument in two steps. I first analyse the revelation strategy with regard to the guidelines given by Paul and discuss whether it is useful in solving the problems that she identifies. Concerning the information problem, I begin by considering if the sources of knowledge to make decisions on the revelatory value that Paul suggests are able to properly inform the decision-makers. According to Paul, the information one can subjectively evaluate to adopt the revelation strategy when making transformative choices are (1) the value of new knowledge that new experiences harbour and (2) one's own taste for epistemic transformation. I argue that these two sources in assigning the revelatory value cannot inform individuals about experience-specific factors so that they can make novel analysis about each new experience that they face. Under this structure, it appears that for someone with a given taste for epistemic transformation, every new experience comes with a positive revelatory value.

There is also no room to assign disvalue to new experiences; hence, it is not clear how individuals can reject specific new experiences rationally and how the revelation strategy can represent these decisions. In addition, the structure of the revelation strategy undermines the role of first-personal deliberations. If decision theory is to suggest that there is a rationally positive value in new experiences, then there is no need for decision-makers to personally deliberate their decisions to be rational. This conclusion, however, contradicts the crucial role that Paul assigns to first-personal deliberations in rational decision-making and the aims of her project. Overall, the revelation strategy is insufficient to solve the

information problem to eliminate decision-makers' need for evaluations regarding the outcomes of each new experience that they decide about.

For the preference-change problem, it is unclear how individuals can weigh the value of revelation of an alternative life against the value of satisfying their current preferences. Even if individuals do not prefer their current life as much and have a 'higher-order preference to change their first-order preferences', it does not give them sufficient decision-theoretic guidance to value the revelation of one transformative experience higher than the value of satisfying their current preferences or than the value of discovering another transformative experience.

Overall, in this part, I argue that Paul's configuration does not solve the problems of transformative experiences but reconstructs the decisions in a way that the problems become less central to the considerations about transformative experiences, however her attempt provides insufficient suggestions for making rational evaluations.

In the second part of the argument, I turn to the debates generated by Paul's account to examine the proposals made by her commentators to solve the problems of transformative experiences. I try to reconfigure the revelation strategy to elaborate further whether it can solve the problems and serve as a decision-theoretic basis. Consequently, among the group of respondents that focused on how individuals can make transformative decisions, I study two accounts, Harman (2015) and Dougherty, et al. (2015), extensively for the information problem and that of Barnes (2015) for the preference-change problem.

With the first group, I identify that there can be different decision-making strategies for different transformative experiences. Valuing revelation can be one plausible strategy to make at least some transformative choices. Secondly, the lack of attention Paul gives to identifying what use external information exactly has troubles her commentators. Consequently, I try to reconfigure the revelation strategy in a way that the discovery of experience is decided with regard to external information in order to clarify external information's role. I suggest that with this configuration, individuals are able to use the information they have to decide if a transformative experience is available to them and also evaluate the likelihood of the outcomes that they positively value to discover. If this is the relevant information to their considerations regarding a transformative experience, the revelation strategy can help them to make a rational evaluation. However, I argue that the reconfigured revelation strategy too cannot solve the preference-change problem. The analysis does not tell how revelatory value evaluated in this way can be compared to the value of satisfying one's current preferences.

With Barnes' (2015) paper, I emphasize that the value of revelation is not necessarily a central concern for someone who is content preferring his/her current self and preferences and highly values satisfying them. Even if one values discovery of new preferences positively, the value of satisfying one's current preferences has a more central role in one's evaluation of alternative lives than the value of discovering new preferences and selves. Overall, it should be plausible to presume that the extent to which individuals value their current life and the choices that they have already made to make their life as it is has crucial importance for them when deciding to make fundamental changes. Such deliberations regarding one's current preferences are considered to be rational in the context of preference-satisfaction analysis; they should also be regarded as rational in the transformative experience framework. However, the revelation strategy does not have the basis to capture the rationality behind preserving one's current preferences and self. More sophisticated strategies to make comparative wellbeing analysis is needed to deal with the preference-change problem of transformative experiences.

1.4 Structure of the Chapters

The order of the thesis will be as follows. Chapter two will introduce *Transformative Experience* (2014) from Paul. In doing so, I largely present Paul's account and summarize her main arguments. I define what transformative experiences are and identify the problems that Paul claims are caused by them. I then explicate the role of subjective values and external information in first-personal decision-making, to illustrate the limits of applying rationality norms for transformative experiences. After that, I elaborate on the role of decision theory in Paul's evaluation of transformative experiences. Lastly, I present the revelation strategy as given by Paul. At the end of the chapter, I present my research questions and how my argument will follow. To begin my analysis, I examine the shortcomings of the revelation strategy, with respect to the guidelines provided by Paul, to solve each problem of transformative experiences. In this chapter, I will primarily answer the general research question.

In the third chapter, I turn my attention to the debates that *Transformative Experience* has generated. I first present an overview of the commentators and their critiques, as well as identify the group of discussants of interest to this thesis in terms of relevance to the specific research question. Next, I consider the discussions of Harman and Dougherty, et al. in order to elaborate on what improvements must be made to the revelation

strategy to solve the information problem adequately. Grounded in their points, I discuss whether weighing the value of revelation with regard to external information is able to solve the information problem, at least in the case of relevant epistemically transformative experiences. I then discuss if this reconfiguration can also be useful to solve the preference-change problem. After surmising that the reconfigured strategy will be insufficient for the preference-change problem, I present Barnes' account and Paul's response to discuss the preference-change problem further. With respect to their debate, I identify the problems entailed when using the revelation strategy to evaluate preference-change. At the end of the section, I propose a new direction for research on transformative decision-making by explicating Brigg's account and share my final comments on attempts to make life-changing decisions rationally. The last chapter shares concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 2: TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND HOW TO MAKE LIFE-CHANGING DECISIONS

2.1 Would You Like to Become a Vampire?

Paul (2014, p.1) begins her account with a humorous question. Imagine that it is an actual possibility; would you like to become a vampire? You would be immortal and have a new range of experiences. Do you have ethical concerns? Worry not. You should know that contemporary vampires do not kill humans. They drink animal blood.³ Suppose some of your friends and loved ones have already become vampires and they are very happy with their decision. They all tell you that they feel amazing and none would go back to being a human again. Could you make an informed and rational decision based only on what you had heard about vampire life?

Paul argues that if you want to make a choice by weighing your options, you cannot do it rationally, as you cannot compare your current self and theoretical vampire self to evaluate which one is better off. Your past experiences cannot help you to know whether you have a taste for the vampire experiences because your experiences are only that of a human. You can do your research and listen to your vampire friends trying to describe how they feel. However, since they would be describing a state in which you have never been, you cannot fully comprehend what it means to be a vampire (p.2). You can still base your decision on your research detailing the level of wellbeing felt by other people who chose to become vampires, but no matter how much information you gather, the data on average vampire life cannot help you to make a personal decision. After all, the decision concerns your future, not the weighted futures of other people, and you cannot know what it would feel like to be a vampire *for you* before actually making the transition.

Despite the fact that in reality we cannot choose to become mythical immortal creatures, according to Paul, we do come across fundamentally similar situations. Very often our most consequential life decisions require us to experience something that is unlike anything we have previously experienced. These experiences teach us things that we could not learn from any other source and change essential parts of our deliberations (p.2). As a result, they cause dramatic personal changes and become life-changing.

³ They could also opt to drink vegan blood, per the reader's preference.

The problems concerning such experiences are Paul's focus of study. She asks how we can make rational decisions when we face limitations as illustrated above:

In particular, the question we will consider is, how should we, as individuals who are intelligent and capable reasoners in ordinary circumstances, finding ourselves in a situation where we have only limited access to certain kinds of facts, proceed rationally when making decisions about our subjective futures? In other words, what are the normative constraints on our reasoning, if we are to deliberate and choose to act rationally, when we are in this sort of situation (p. 21)?⁴

Paul underlines that although there are other authors/researchers also interested in life-changing decisions, they only focus on personally transformative aspects (p.103). In her opinion, however, choices about new experiences are especially difficult to make because new experiences bring new information and alter our epistemic perspective, which affects our way of perceiving and understanding the world and, hence, changes our preferences. New experiences come with two problems. One is that epistemic constraints hinder individuals from making informed evaluations about their tastes and preferences for new experiences. There is also a problem of preference-change. Individuals need to make assessments about alternative futures that harbour alternative selves with different preference-sets to make their decisions. However, the perspective of future self is not available to make comparisons (Paul, 2015c, p.490). Consequent of these two problems, individuals are unable to make rational assessments about their alternative futures. Prior to examining the hardships created by life-changing decisions, we will focus on epistemically and personal transformative experiences, as illustrated by Paul, which will be detailed in the next section.

⁴ We should note here that Paul (2014, p.19) focuses on the cases where there are no external limitations that prevent individuals from freely determining their decisions. There is no dictator telling when to get married, where to work, or how to live. Hence, there are no concerns about whether one has autonomy and freedom to make his/her personal choices. The concern is the limits within the individuals to make choices without violating the natural and ordinary ways of decision-making. 'The natural and ordinary way' for Paul is being in accordance with the rationality norms of Western societies, as the real-world agents that concern her are presumed to be part of those societies, which have a culture that values individual agency and expects individuals to make choices that are relevant to who they are and what they seek from life (p.105). Essentially, with no external limitations, the question is one of individual capacity to follow the norms of rationality to estimate the value of alternative futures and to take actions in accordance with those estimations.

2.2 Transformative Experiences and Their Impact on Our Selves

2.2.1 Epistemic transformation and personal transformation

To introduce epistemic transformation, Paul presents Frank Jackson's (1982) thought experiment of Mary from the black and white room. According to Jackson's illustration, Mary is a woman who spent her entire life in a black and white room and had never seen any true colour (Jackson, 1986, p.291). When Mary leaves the black and white room for the first time, she sees the colour red. Jackson argues that Mary could only know what red is after seeing it and not a moment before, even if she dedicated herself to studying all that can be learned through science about seeing colours. According to Paul (2014, p.9-10), the example of Mary illustrates something very important about new experiences: their impact on our epistemic capacities. When a person has an experience unlike any other experience he/she had before, that person learns something that could not be learned from any other source. These are epistemically transformative experiences. Once Mary sees the colour red, she is able to comprehend what it is like to see red and what it is like to be Mary who sees red. She also gains abilities to react to the experience of seeing red, such as imagining and recognizing red. Thus, seeing red for the first time transforms Mary's epistemic perspective.

Real-life situations of ordinary people who do not spend their lives in black and white rooms can also involve epistemically transformative experiences (p.14). To illustrate this, Paul presents tasting a durian fruit for the first time. The durian is known for being delicious despite having a smell which many people find revolting. Yet some people develop a love for durian after tasting it, while others hate it. The point is that even if everybody who tastes a durian indeed loves it, one cannot imagine the taste of durian beforehand by listening to the comments of others. We can only gain this information by tasting a durian ourselves.⁵

Whether tasting the durian fruit is deemed a pleasant experience or not, it most probably will not fundamentally change our perception regarding fruits or alter our core preferences (p. 15). What about Mary? Paul underlines that Mary cannot imagine what it is like to see red before seeing red, but also—and more importantly—she cannot imagine what it is like to be Mary who sees red. For Mary, after leaving the black and white room, seeing colours can be so compelling that it might change her whole perception of herself and the

⁵ The problem Paul (2014, p.36) describes is not that any experience people have will be different from the ones before. Individuals cannot know how exactly each new fruit tastes; however, if they know enough about the kind-defining properties of durian, they can know what eating a durian is like for them. The amount of unknowns regarding the specific durian fruit they are going to have for breakfast does have enough of an impact on their epistemic perspective to keep their breakfast preferences incomplete.

way in which she prefers to live her life. Paul underlines that sometimes the transformation due to a new experience can be so drastic that it can be personally transformative (p.17):

If an experience changes you enough to substantially change your point of view, thus substantially revising your core preferences or revising how you experience being yourself, it is a personally transformative experience (p.16).

For people who already enjoy seeing a rich range of colours, the epistemic transformation due to seeing a new colour might not lead to a deep transformation of preferences to significantly affect the way one lives his/her life. Yet, there are some experiences, which are personally transformative nearly universally. Preparing for a contest, dedicating oneself for scientific research, falling in love, and having an animal friend are examples of experiences that can alter our preferences and change us in degrees as a person. Such experiences can be fundamentally life-changing, depending on the extent of the change and how deeply it alters our core preferences and perspective (p.15).

Paul states that what interests her most are both epistemically and personally transformative experiences, which she simply refers to as transformative experiences (p.17). The next section will present the real-life transformative choices that she frequently discusses.

2.2.2 Real-life transformative experiences

Paul considers gaining a new sensory ability a special case of transformative experience (p.56) and argues that people cannot comprehend how much a new sensory ability might affect their perception of the world with regard to what people with that ability tell about it. Real-life examples include having cochlear implants or retinal surgery. There is great uncertainty regarding how an individual would react to having a cochlear implant, as he/she cannot imagine what it is like to hear.⁶ There are also life-changing experiences that take place over time, which are identified as 'extended transformative experiences' by Paul

⁶ If a transformative decision needs to be made by someone other than the individual herself who will have the implant, the decision problems becomes more complicated. Paul (2014) discusses the case of cochlear implants to elaborate on this point. One way of making such a decision is of course focusing on the future wellbeing of the person who will undergo the operation (61). In the case of a child patient, it is the parents who are in the position to make the decision. However, for the parents, it is unclear in which future—with or without the implants—the child's wellbeing would be greater. They cannot access the necessary information—what it is like to be deaf and what it is like to hear with cochlear implants—to compare the two very different futures for their child, each which would result in the child having very different experiences and core preferences (p.84). For this thesis, I am only interested in how individuals make life-changing choices for themselves; hence, I will not introduce the details of transformative decision-making for someone else.

(p.94). Career paths and long-term relationships, which transform values and personal preferences over time, are examples of such experiences (p.96-98).

The life-changing experience that receives the most attention in Paul's account is that of becoming a parent (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Paul (2014, p.75) argues that having a child is an epistemically transformative experience, just like Mary's experience of leaving the black and white room. Until they have a child of their own, the prospective parents cannot know what it is like to have a child or what it would be like to be that future version of themselves who have a child. There are of course more books for those soon to be embarking on the journey of parenthood than there are for those anticipating seeing red for the first time. However, Paul insists that external information about neither experience can be successful in explaining how it would be like *for you* to have that particular experience. How you would experience having your own child is unique partly because it involves a particular other human being, your child, that brings a certain amount of unpredictability in itself. Just as you cannot know what it means to you to be a parent, you cannot know how your relationship with your child would be. Also, you will enter a new state when the child is born, a state in which you have not previously experienced (p.77). Therefore, there are layers of epistemic transformation in this particular experience (p.78-79).

Paul also argues that however the experience may be—a happy life with this new human being or a family tragedy—it will be personally transformative and fundamentally life-changing (p.80). It most likely will change your core values and the way you choose to live your life. While you can rightly assume that you will fundamentally change after having a child, you cannot know how exactly the change will happen. Will you care less about self-development? Will your career still be an important part of your identity? How much more will you value your child's welfare over your own? Will you love your pet animal or partner the same? Or more? Or less (p.81)? Paul states that the unknowns of how radically we might change due to transformative experiences leads to the idea that "what you can know at one time can be inaccessible to you at another time". She identifies two consequent problems for individuals when they are in transformative decision situations; they lack the necessary epistemic perspective (1) to know what outcomes their alternatives involve and whether they have taste for those outcomes (the information problem) and (2) to compare their preference-satisfaction levels under alternative scenarios (the preference-change problem) (p.16-18). The details of these problems will be shared in the next section, beginning with the information problem.

2.3 Two Problems of Transformative Experiences

2.3.1 The information problem

In a nutshell, the first problem with transformative choices is that the phenomenological character of transformative experiences is inaccessible to individuals prior to having the actual experiences, which prevents them from making informed evaluations regarding how much they would like to have the outcomes⁷ of such experiences (p.177). Once people have gained the appropriate experience, they can make inferences for similar experiences (p.14).

According to Paul, the choice of whether to undergo new experiences which are likely to have significant impacts on the course of one's life needs to be determined from a subjective position and involve reflective deliberations on alternative futures (p.18). In order to successfully perform these deliberations, one needs to be able to cognitively model the alternative futures, or in other words, first-personally imagine them. The reason for this is that when we make a decision about our future, we naturally want to imagine our alternatives and the related outcomes to weigh the options (p.68). As an example, suppose you want to move to another city. You will first need to collect external information on what life is like in different cities. Then, to make sense of the information you collected, you need to imagine yourself living in the alternative cities (Paul, 2015c, p.480). If you are considering a cold Northern city, you need to imagine spending the winter with limited daylight, adjusting to an underwhelming cuisine, different social rules, and so on. Succinctly, to make a decision according to the information that you gathered, you need to imagine living with the outcomes of a life in a Northern city, so that you can then decide whether you would prefer it over another alternative.

According to Paul, especially for high-stakes decisions where individuals need to reflect on how they want to realize their future and then deliberate how they should act to realize it, possessing the relevant experience is crucial (p.478-479). Experiences generate the information that is essential for individuals to be able to have accurate first-personal representations of their alternatives, so that they can imagine themselves living these alternatives and make subjective value assessments (Paul, 2014, p.12-13).

Paul strongly underlines that rational decisions have to be made with what she calls 'subjective values', as these values are what form preferences (p.18). She argues that no

⁷ Paul underlines that she places extra emphasis on 'outcomes' because values are assumed to be assigned to outcomes in decision theories and because she also uses normative decision-theoretic framework to approach her subject (Paul, 2015c, p.478). More will be said in terms of why she applies this framework and the relevance of it to the study later.

matter how much individuals try to learn about the outcomes of a transformative experience in advance, they cannot develop informed preferences without their subjective values (p.28). As mentioned before, we refer to this problem as *the information problem*. However, to fully understand the information problem, it is important to present how Paul defines subjective values, which is what I will now do next.

2.3.2 The role of subjective values

To be concise, subjective values are ‘what it is like’ values (Paul, 2015c, p.477). They are experientially grounded, which means that having the specific experience is essential for individuals to first-personally grasp its phenomenological character, so that they can subjectively evaluate their taste for that experience (Paul, 2014, p.13). One cannot subjectively evaluate what his/her taste would be for what he/she has never before experienced. Thus, one also cannot know his/her preference for that experience.

Subjective value is not about selfish or self-centric evaluations. One’s personal preferences based on his/her subjective values can be strictly self-serving or altruistic. Nor does subjective value mean that there is some inner self that determines values based on intrinsic features of individuals (Paul, 2015c, p.478). In other words, subjective value is not our ‘gut feeling’ telling us what we are ‘supposed to choose’. Subjective value of experiences is also not about mere happiness, pleasure, or pain (Paul, 2014, p.178). It has more to do with the qualitative character of gains and losses than hedonistic representations (p.12). It is simply one’s ability to first-personally imagine what the outcomes of an experience would be like to deliberate if he/she has taste for them or not (p.28).

Subjective values can involve practical reasons, moral or political values, or other types of external elements such as legal or financial concerns that affect people’s deliberations. Naturally, people take factors that are not solely about the phenomenological character of new experiences into account when they make projections about the outcomes of an experience to make their choices (Paul, 2015c, p.486). Paul underlines that external constraints do not dispose of the necessity of first-personal representations to subjectively deliberate about one’s preferences (p.479). To illustrate this point, if one does not want to have a child due to his/her concerns about the world population, he/she cannot make a rational decision solely based on this concern without also subjectively weighing this outcome against the outcomes in which he/she regrets being a childless elderly or raising a human being that could serve the planet well.

As I understand, the utmost importance of subjective values for transformative experiences is that people cannot make their personal evaluations with regard to the phenomenological character of experiences, to have informed expectations about the outcomes that interest the phenomenological character of experiences so that they can build their preferences for those outcomes and take the relevant actions.⁸

2.3.3 The role of external information

So far I have presented and detailed Paul's emphasis on the role of subjective values to make informed choices. Yet, this does not mean that external data is entirely irrelevant to transformative choices. Individuals can take into account external information sources such as testimonies, expert opinions and scientific evidence if they want to be as informed as possible about the possible outcomes before they make their choices. On the other hand, according to Paul, no matter how many details friends share or how many post-experience outcomes experts report, this information is of limited use—it can provide an estimation of the likelihood of possible outcomes but cannot be used to help people to ‘represent their own outcomes’ or let them comprehend the range of possibilities for themselves (p.481).

Paul (2014, p.126) identifies two reasons to support her claim. First of all, there are practical limitations regarding how much the data can inform people. Individuals might not have access to sophisticatedly detailed analysis of their individual-specific subject simply because such data does not exist (Paul, 2015c, p.487-488). Scientific evidence has its methodological limitations in providing perfectly accurate and reliable generalities.

In addition, not prioritizing individuals' own perspective and preferences when developing their preference-order is an unusual way to achieve preference satisfaction (Paul, 2014, p.101). Even if we suppose that very reliable external data exists, demonstrating the full range of possible outcomes and a statistical breakdown of other people's responses, people still cannot confidently base their personal choices on this data without contemplating on whether *they* would like the outcome. After all, there is no single ideal life plan that suits everyone; there are different paths for different people. Especially if people are making a life-changing decision where the stakes are too high to exclude their own

⁸ Among Paul's critics, quite a number of authors object her position about role of subjective values to make informed transformative choices. The position of this thesis is that although critics are rightly confused on what subjective values mean, their approach is mistaken. More will be said about why in Chapter 3. For now, I want to note that subjective values are better understood with examples than definitional sentences. Mary does not know what it is like to see red so cannot subjectively evaluate its value for her. A blind person cannot know what it is like to be able to see. One cannot know what it is like to be drunk without getting drunk for the first time. Neither can one imagine new and fundamentally alien experiences to be able to subjectively evaluate his/her taste for having them to have an informed preference for them.

perspective, they would need to apply the external information to their own case (2015c, p.482). Yet, no matter how much external information you gather, you still would need to “first-personally project yourself in each possible future” to assign your subjective values and to order your preferences accordingly.

Can we, nevertheless, use external information to estimate the numerical range of utilities and the likelihood of possible outcomes (p.487)? Paul argues that we cannot. It has been presented above that evidence from testimony or scientific data is insufficient to reveal the individual-specific knowledge that one needs. Notice that this argument indicates the insufficiency of external information to reveal individuals’ subjective values regarding transformative experience. Thus, so far we illustrated the limits of external information to guide individuals under the information problem. There are also limits to use external information due to the preference-change problem.

The evidence that external data can provide is that (for example, when becoming a parent) people’s preferences change as a result of having a child in a way that being your child’s parent satisfies the post-child preferences (Paul, 2014, p.90). However, this is not the evidence that one can consult to satisfy his/her current preferences when considering a decision on parenthood.

To illustrate further, if you are a carefree person who likes to travel the world and have spontaneous adventures, and if the available scientific data confidently tells you that if you become a parent, you are most likely to turn into a loving mother who wants only to spend time with her child, is this information relevant to your current self? As Paul (2015c, p.489) views it, the problem is that “in cases of transformative decision-making, we have an in-principle problem with ex ante decisions made for ex post subjective values and preferences”. If you want to make your decision consistent with your current self’s values and preferences, taking your post-experience self’s values and preferences into account would be a violation of your current preferences if your post-transformation values and preferences do not correspond to the current ones.

Paul (2014, p.90) underlines that the profound experience of becoming a parent changes people to such an extent that most do not wish to return to their pre-child preferences—like our hypothetical vampire transformation example from earlier. Perhaps, this reveals that you should have children, as once they arrive, they will satisfy your post-child preferences. Accordingly, even if you are a travel-loving, spontaneous all-nighter whose lifestyle is not compatible with raising a child, you should still have one. In other words, ignoring one’s current preferences may in fact be the best strategy to make such a

transformative decision (p.91). However, if you try to make your choice in this way, there is still an existential problem that you will face: is this transformation going to make you better off or just someone different (Paul, 2015c, p.492)? How can you decide between your pre-transformation and post-transformation selves without having access to the perspective of the future self to evaluate which outcome will bring you more satisfaction and wellbeing? The question here exemplifies *the preference-change problem* that we mentioned before. The details of this problem will be presented in the next part.

2.3.4 The preference-change problem

As Paul (2015c) argues, learning something new through experience can fundamentally alter people's future selves, though they may not be able to comprehend how the transformation will occur before undergoing it. As individuals' first-personal perspective under transformation is not invariant (p.474) and as the future self's perspective is missing, when making a transformative choice, individuals cannot evaluate and compare their preference-satisfaction levels under alternative futures from their first-personal perspective (p.491). Accordingly, the second problem about transformative experiences is "incommensurable preferences across selves" or as we will simply refer to it: the preference-change problem (p.489):

(...) you must choose between earlier and later selves, with different sets of preferences, but where your earlier self lacks crucial information about the values, preferences and perspectives of your possible later selves. You cannot first-personally foresee or represent the new self you are making yourself into.

Paul (2015b, p.798-799) states that transformative experiences "entail profound epistemic alienation" from "possible future outcomes", and "profound metaphysical alienation" from "possible future selves". The point here is not that the post-transformation self is metaphysically distinct from the person's current self. It is that "what you can know about yourself at one time can be inaccessible to you at another time" (Paul, 2014, p.6-7). As one does not fully know who she is making herself to become, she cannot know (1) if she has a taste for what she is going to become or (2) whether her current opinion of what she might become should even matter or not. If you are not living in accordance with your teenage years' resolutions, does it mean that you failed to realize your dreams and wishes, or that you developed a better opinion, or just a 'different' opinion on what you want from your

life, in another period of your life? The problem here is also not about whether you would regret your decision or not. It is about how you can rationally decide which set of preferences and values to prioritize when comparing alternative future in which you will be a significantly different person with different core preferences (Paul, 2015c, p.475).

It is important to highlight once again that for Paul (2014, p.102), the issue with transformative experiences is not that we cannot make our decisions with regard to the subjective values of our alternative futures because the information about the nature of transformative experiences and about our future selves is incomplete. Instead, it is that we cannot assess the subjective value of our alternatives at all, as crucial information we need—the phenomenological character of new experience and our future self’s perspective—can never be available at the time of the decision. Hence, she claims that transformative experiences and the two problems they challenge decision theory and “decision-making made from the subjective perspective of the individual” (p.18). That is, due to the information and preference-change problems of transformative experiences, individuals cannot apply the decision-theoretic strategies to rationally compare their alternatives with respect to their preference-sets, as they cannot determine their preferences in the first place. The next section will present the issue in detail and also introduce Paul’s decision-theoretic solution.

2.4 Decision-Theoretic Guidance to Make Rational Transformative Decisions

2.4.1 The limits of making rational transformative decisions

While questioning “whether it is even possible for real world agents to meet an acceptable rational, normative standard when making certain epistemically and personally transformative decisions from the subjective point of view”, Paul states that she approaches the problems of transformative experiences from a decision-theoretic perspective, as the theory gives action-guiding principles to make rational decisions (p. 20-21). When considering the aforementioned question, she in particular has in mind decisions with high-stake outcomes, which call for being treated with extra care, caution, and rationale (p.25).

In the standard models of decision theory, to make a choice rationally, agents need to first determine which acts are available to them. They then need to determine the possible outcomes of each act, as well as the likelihood of each outcome. Next, they can calculate the expected values of the outcomes and rank them accordingly, so that they can choose the act that generates the outcomes with the highest expected values. Real decision-makers,

however, are faced with boundaries, which prevent them from applying the standard model. For once, they generally do not have enough information to accurately predict the likelihood of all available outcomes. As illustrated in the case of transformative experiences, sometimes they also lack the necessary information regarding their own tastes and preferences. Therefore, they are unable to construct their preferences with regard to their value spaces, as expected by standard accounts of decision theory. Having said that, the gap between real and ideal decision-makers is not the main problem encountered by Paul's account of transformative experiences.

Paul seeks to solve the problems of transformative experiences according to decision-theoretic norms. Specifically, she wants to base her analysis on what she calls 'normative decision theory', which she defines as a more realistic version of decision theory that captures the norms that can be used to make rational decisions by describing "the range and combination of rules and standards that agents must meet for their decisions to be rational, normatively speaking" (Paul, 2015a, p.151). The idea is that even if individuals cannot perfectly estimate their range of utilities to maximize their expected returns, suffer from faulty reasoning and/or probabilistic uncertainties, and hence, cannot have a complete value function including all of the possible outcomes, decisions made by ordinary people can still be considered to be rational if they conform to the normative model. If individuals can assign approximate values of the most relevant or important outcomes and "apply the right decision theoretic rules" (so choose the outcome that brings the highest expected benefits), instead of calculating expected values of every outcome, they can "conform to the ordinary standard for rational decision-making" (p.151). Consequently, the question concerning transformative experiences is whether ordinary people can conform to the normative standard when making transformative decisions. For this question, let us again consider the example of entering parenthood.

In order to make the parenthood decision in accordance with the normative standard, individuals need to assess the expected value of having a child so that they can rationally decide if they want it or not (Paul, 2014, p. 74). As mentioned above, although real individuals cannot have preference analyses as detailed or precise as perfectly rational agents, they can try to deliberate about a variety of possible outcomes and compare their expected values. In this way, the act they choose is supposed to bring them higher expected subjective values than the other alternatives that they have considered. However, according to Paul (2015c, p.486), the problem of becoming a parent in decision-theoretic terms is that people lack the value function to represent their subjective values regarding the outcomes

involved in being a parent. First, the decision-makers face epistemic uncertainty; not knowing what it is like to be a parent. Also, as the strong attachment they will have with their child will be personally transformative, their core preferences will change, though they cannot project the extent and the direction of this change (Paul, 2014, p.82). Therefore, their deliberations cannot help them comprehend the outcomes of the relevant states, as from first-personal perspective; they cannot hypothesise who they will become as a result of having a child prior to doing so in order to evaluate their preference for this transformation. They cannot even determine the relevant states because their previous experience cannot inform them about the states of parenthood. Hence, they cannot construct a value function in a way that can meet the standard of normative rationality (p.83).⁹

From the decision theoretic perspective, the problems with transformative experiences also violate the completeness axiom. While decision-makers lack ‘rationally assignable preferences’ about the post-transformation outcomes, ‘completeness requires agents to have definite preferences for any gamble’. That is, in order to have a complete preference order, agents need to rationally prefer to take the gamble, prefer to not take it, or be indifferent towards it. If post-transformation future self is the prize of taking the gamble, decision-makers do have the complete value function to conform to the preference set of {transform, not transform, be indifferent} (Paul, 2015c, p.491).

Paul (2014, p.50) argues that the transformative choices that incorporate significant preference-changes are not extreme cases; they are the central parts of our lives. Accordingly, she argues that decision theory is not able to give action-guiding principles that can aid individuals in making many of their decisions, including the most important ones. After presenting her criticisms of the deficiencies of normative decision theories, Paul states that ‘we need to develop new decision-theoretic models if we want to use normative decision theory as a guide for rational transformative choice, and this opens up new directions for research’ (p.178). We need to investigate how we can construct new decision strategies so that transformative decisions can meet the normative rationality standard in other ways (p.84).

One of Paul’s propositions is ‘to dispense with subjective deliberation and so to dispense with a decision involving subjective values altogether’, which she claims was a strategy of the past, when non-subjective facts played a more central role in shaping people’s lives (p.85). However, she insists that in today’s Western culture, the ordinary

⁹ In the following chapter, I will consider some objections to Paul’s way of designing the parenthood decision, coming from her critic, discussing whether testimony and external evidence can take place of personal experience. As for now, we will leave this argument without further elaboration.

approach to thinking about decisions requires having subjective and personal evaluations for decisions that would have a significant impact on one's life. In many contemporary societies, the cultural norms prompt people to think carefully before having a child, for instance, as it is expected to 'be ready' before becoming a parent (p.70).

Paul admits that she does not have a concrete decision-theoretic solution, yet, is hopeful that there might be more than one solution (p.19). The possible solution on which she focuses the most is that—as in real life, where we sometimes choose new experiences solely to discover what we might learn from them—the value of *revelation* can be the basis of a decision-theoretically applicable strategy. The idea is that if a decision is transformative, individuals can assess whether discovering a new experience, independent of its first-order qualitative character, is desirable to choose to undergo it (p.178). Supposedly, this configuration can help individuals when facing the two problems of transformative experiences. In the next section, I will introduce what we will refer to as *the revelation strategy* and present how, according to Paul, it can be used to solve the problems of transformative experiences and to make transformative choices rationally.

2.4.2 Revelatory value of new experiences and an alternative strategy

Paul aims to reconfigure transformative decisions with regard to preference for revelation/discovery to solve their problems. In a nutshell, preference for revelation means preferring to undergo a transformative experience to learn what it is like. She argues that reconfiguring transformative decisions in a way that the decision is based on the preference for discovering new experience can fit normative decision models and guide individuals to make rational decisions (p.133).

Paul contends that the value of revelation exceeds the first-order qualitative character of experiences. The revelatory value is independent of experience being pleasurable or painful (p.178). Instead, it concerns the subjective value of experience for experience's sake, or knowledge for knowledge's sake (p.117, 119):

If there is subjective value in having certain kinds of experiences, a subjective value that comes apart from whether such experiences contribute to one's first-order happiness and well-being or whether they involve pleasure or pain, then one might choose to have that kind of experience for the sake of having it (p.92).

According to Paul, individuals indeed sometimes choose to undergo new experiences in order to learn what they are like. To illustrate how such configuration can work, let us return to the durian fruit case. If we revise the choice set and construct the relevant outcomes of the decision regarding durian as {discover the taste of durian, not discover the taste of durian}, subjective value of durian becomes linked with discovering the information about durian's taste, not to how it tastes like. Therefore, evaluating the relevant outcomes does not require grasping what it is like to eat a durian in order to assign it a subjective value. The outcome one deliberates about is gaining the knowledge regarding the taste of durian, which is irrelevant to the actual character of the taste of durian (p.113). In addition, if you have had epistemically transformative experiences in the past, you can make use of those to determine the subjective value of having epistemically transformative experiences for you. Under this structure, you do not have the information problem anymore, as you do not use the subjective value of eating durian. You can avoid eating durian, if 'you do not want to risk having a bad fruit experience', or you can eat it solely to have the information regarding its qualitative character revealed (p.38).

Paul argues that, especially for only epistemically transformative experiences, reconfiguring the decision structure according to revelation is a plausible alternative strategy (p.114). Nevertheless, she accepts that experiences that are also personally transformative can be more complex, as they additionally bring the preference-change problem, under which revelation does not only contain epistemic gains but also involves personal changes. Hence, it includes the discovery of a new way of life with fundamentally different core preferences (p.115-116). How can individuals base their decision on their preference for revelation when their preference for revelation is also subject to change? As Paul contends, to overcome the preference-change problem, we need to push the revelation strategy one step further:

If you choose to have the transformative experience, to 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 and how your preferences will change (p.118).

Here, you do not base your choice simply on the discovery of a new experience; you base your choice largely on the discovery of how you will change. The transformative choice is between discovering a new identity and a new life with new preferences, and preserving the

current self and current preferences. If you choose to transform, it is for the sake of revelation of what it means to be a vampire/mother/doctor/wife for you and also for the sake of discovering how your preferences change as a response to your experience. If you choose not to have the experience, then, ‘you do not want to create and satisfy the new preferences’ (p.119). You are fine with your current preferences, maybe because you enjoy your life as it is right now, so discovering another life holds no appeal to you. Nonetheless, neither choice is based on using your knowledge of alternative lives (p.120). Thus, your choice no longer contains the preference-change problem.

What if you regret your choice? Unfortunately, that is a possibility that individuals cannot project rationally. Yet Paul argues that life is also full of mistakes and the choices that bring hardship have revelatory value as well. In that sense, one cannot be wrong about the fact that a new experience will teach something new (p.120). Thus, regretting the choice for revelation after making it does not inherently demonstrate that the choice was made irrationally.

Can the revelation strategy be the decision-theoretic solution to transformative experience problems? Paul (2015c, p.517) herself admits in her later work that she is not fully confident in this approach. She gives a disclaimer that she does not argue that focusing on the subjective value of ‘revelation’ is entirely successful in reconfiguring transformative choices, as these choices incorporate unknown expected subjective values, so their character of revelation is also uncertain and unpredictable. Also, even if you value revelation, your ‘higher-order worry about which preferences to respect (your current ones, or the new ones you’d have as a parent) remains’ (Paul, 2014, p.93-94). On the other hand, she does insist that there is a ‘revelatory value’ and in several occasions in her book argues that at least for decisions that are only epistemically transformative, revelation can be the basis of the relevant value function.

Despite the disclaimer Paul provides, whether the value of discovery can be the basis of a decision-theoretically applicable strategy to solve either problem of transformative experiences is a subject of keen interest. The idea that we make some choices for the sake of knowledge that they might provide is intuitively relatable.¹⁰ While it seems plausible to focus on revelatory value to overcome some epistemic uncertainty problems, making a life-changing decision by reconfiguring preferences with regard to revelatory value appears to be insufficient. It is hard to imagine prospective parents settling for merely the discovery of

¹⁰ Consider how people develop music preferences or movie preferences by first consuming these goods in order to develop a taste. Similarly, people take up a hobby to develop their appreciation for a new interest.

becoming a parent when they make such a decision, even if they do not strictly prefer to continue their current way of life. All in all, before setting this issue aside, there is a need for further study on whether revelatory value can be a decision-theoretic solution, which is my aim in this thesis. Consequently, in the next section, I will present the critical points and questions that I raise to examine the revelation strategy.

2.5 Where to Go from Here: A Discussion on Revelation

Paul's *Transformative Experience*, the problems she addresses, the challenges she poses to decision theories, and the decision-theoretic solution she develops with respect to the value of revelation raise various kinds of objections in one's mind. At the same time, it is hard to not to recognize the common sense in her points. She takes an original and rich approach to tackle life-changing decisions and to discuss the limits of rational decision-making under deep epistemic uncertainties, and her suggestion of how to solve the problems of transformative experiences is novel. Thus, there are multiple approaches one can take to study her account.

As mentioned in the introduction, the area of interest of this thesis is the problem-solving capacity of the revelation strategy. My general research question regarding Paul's account is *what the role of 'the value of discovering something new' can be for decision theory to solve the problems caused by transformative experiences*. In order to approach this question, in the next section, I will first investigate whether this strategy can actually solve the problems of transformative experiences, and then I will address the deficiencies in Paul's propositions with respect to each problem. Following my analysis, I will propose how to further study 'the value of discovering something new' for rational decision-making. As such, the chapter will conclude with a suggestion to focus on to the current debates on transformative experiences.

2.5.1 What is missing in the revelation strategy?

Paul's (2014, p.120) proposition is that in order to meet the normative standard of rationality when making transformative choices, we can choose whether we want the revelation of "how our life will unfold". She argues that, in this way, the preference for transformation becomes irrelevant of the subjective value of what the experience is like, so the lack of information about the phenomenological character of the experience is no longer a problem. This approach also frees the decision-maker having to compare alternative

preference-sets and the satisfaction they bring. Hence, the revelation strategy nullifies both problems encountered by transformative choice.

In order to investigate if this is indeed the case, it is important to first elaborate on how the revelation strategy solves either problem. We can then evaluate its adequacy as a decision-theoretic solution and also address the specific inadequacies from which it suffers. My critique in this aspect is that following Paul's guidelines to make transformative decisions with regard to revelation does not solve the problems of transformative experiences; rather, it changes the basis in a way that the problems become irrelevant to the decision. However, resolving the problems in this way does not provide the decision-theoretic guidance individuals need to make rational transformative choices. I will present the details of my critique with respect to each problem below, starting with the information problem.¹¹

Paul identifies two sources of information to subjectively deliberate the value of revelation. Firstly, individuals can know transformative experiences have new information to contribute to their epistemic capacity. Secondly, if they have had epistemically transformative experiences before, they can know if they have a taste for discovering new things. Theoretically, they can rely on this knowledge to rationally prefer new experiences. I argue that such knowledge can be useful indeed to indicate what one might find valuable about having new experiences. One can base his/her decision on the value of what a new experience might teach as well. However, this way of evaluation cannot provide a decision-theoretic basis to make rational assessments in general, as it is not explicit how individuals are supposed to subjectively evaluate whether each new experience has this value for them. More specifically, there is no room in Paul's suggestion to assess case-specific factors to determine the degrees of subjective value of revelation, making the revelation strategy inadequate to offer a ground to decision-makers to choose to abstain or value one transformative experience to another rationally. There is also limited room for first-personal deliberation about new experiences. Overall, the source of information that the revelation strategy offers about the value of discovery is not sufficient to eliminate the information problem.

In terms of the lack of case-specific factors, given that one has a taste for new experiences, since every new experience has revelatory value for what it can teach, one should always choose to undergo new experiences because the revelation of new

¹¹ In order to discuss the information-specific problems with Paul's suggestion, we consider only epistemically transformative experiences that do not change individuals' core preferences but contribute to their epistemic capacity.

information would benefit him/her and satisfy his/her preferences. Paul underlines that if individuals do not want revelation, they can choose to abstain. However, it is not clear how that decision can be represented under the value function of the revelation strategy. If you positively value new experiences but decide not to eat a durian, the revelation strategy does not give you a rational basis to justify this decision. Furthermore, if one values discovering new tastes positively, and if there are two transformative experiences necessitating the individual to choose one over the other, he/she needs to assign a higher revelatory value to one of the alternatives. Based on his/her taste for new experiences and intrinsic value of the revelation of new knowledge, one cannot rationally prefer vegemite to durian fruit with the revelation strategy, as he/she cannot assess the degrees of revelatory value for each new experience with this strategy. We can suppose that if an individual has a strong distaste for new experiences, then he/she can rationally choose not to undergo them. This sort of presupposition, though, again fails to address case-specific factors to assess the revelatory value.

One can argue that revelation is nevertheless the only value that individuals can rationally evaluate and that they should indeed undergo new experiences to enrich their epistemic capacity and to be better-off. Additionally, one can argue that structuring transformative decisions in a way that the information regarding the phenomenological character of new experiences becomes irrelevant is the best solution to this problem. Generally speaking, yes, discarding the evaluation of case-specific factors is one means of remedying the information problem. Flipping a coin can also be another possible solution. In Paul's project, on the other hand, there are other conditions to be fulfilled. One important condition is that rationality norms require individuals to make their decisions from their first-personal perspective; as a result, we can disregard flipped coins. Another important underlying assumption about transformative experiences is that individuals want to make informed and rational (in the sense of maximization) decisions, which not only parallels the rules of decision theory but is also deferential to societal norms (Paul, 2014, p.105). Therefore, the solution Paul looks for is not just a formal representation of epistemic uncertainty; the answer she wants cannot undermine the role of first-personal deliberations. However, except the value she assigns to one's taste for new experiences, Paul narrows the ground for individuals to personally deliberate whether they have a taste for the particular new experience that they are deciding for.

Paul aims to make information regarding new experiences' first-order qualitative character irrelevant to the decision-making procedure; nonetheless, she ultimately suggests

a configuration in which not undergoing new experiences appears to be irrational, as such decisions can only be based on individuals' reserved feelings regarding the negative outcomes of new experiences, which are not rationally grounded and are irrelevant of experiences' revelatory character. Overall, the revelation strategy as defined by Paul cannot adequately inform the decision-makers concerning their taste for each new experience in order to make case-specific information unnecessary or irrelevant for them. Consequently, it fails to solve the information problem. This strategy also appears to give a very limited role to one's first-personal deliberations about his/her own tastes to decide for epistemically transformative experiences, which contradicts Paul's project.

2.5.2 Evaluating revelation for preference-change

When it comes to the preference-change problem, Paul attempts to reconfigure life-changing choices in a way that the choice is not only based on the revelation of new experience but also on the revelation of alternative lives that come with different preference-sets. For this problem, however, the revelation strategy is again insufficient to guide individuals.

The solution Paul proposes here is again not able to accommodate case-specific aspects of new experiences. Nevertheless, the problem at hand is different from what has been previously discussed regarding the information problem. Above, I examined how the lack of case-specific factors eliminates the option to abstain from new experiences rationally. For the sake of simplicity, I evaluated the information problem only for the epistemically transformative experiences. For these experiences, I did not object that if one values revelation highly and has a taste for new epistemically transformative experiences, one can apply the revelation strategy to rationally undergo said experiences. Here, under the preference-change problem, personal transformation is also one outcome of undergoing new experiences, because of which, if individuals positively value the revelation of new experiences, it is not sufficient for them to rationally undergo, as their decision requires a deeper comparative evaluation.

When discussing the choice of becoming a parent, Paul underlines at one point that even if there are outcomes of a transformative experience that one positively values, he/she must weigh those against the other possible outcomes to be able to rationally judge the value of the overall outcome (Paul, 2015a, p.153). For example, if one values transferring his/her genes and therefore values having a child, he/she still needs to weigh this outcome against spending long sleepless nights comforting a crying baby and cleaning a constant stream of bodily fluids to rationally deliberate his/her preference order. Paul's revelation

strategy is also subject of a similar critique. Kauppinen (2015, p.372-373) puts forth that if we are unable to anticipate the outcome of an experience, then its revelatory value cannot be the basis to weight the outcomes and make rational choices. The positive value of the revelation would “radically be outweighed” by the possible negative outcomes attached to the transformation. This is to say that people cannot rationally value the discovery of having children higher than their current preferences without being concerned as to whether they would be happy with children.

As decision-makers’ preference-order changes with transformation, they are required to give up on certain things that they currently value and prefer. Therefore, even if individuals value discovering new experiences positively, they must compare that value with the value of continuing their current preferences before choosing to be transformed. As an example, if an individual values revelation of becoming a parent, has a taste for discovering new family bonds, he/she cannot decide that he/she will benefit from having a child, as the revelation comes with personal change and a trade-off, he/she must weigh the value of revelation against giving up on some of his/her current preferences such as travelling frequently. We can characterize this issue as ‘comparing apples to oranges’. How can one rationally conclude that the value of revelation of having a child is higher than the value of satisfying current preferences? Valuing revelation positively does not provide sufficient basis to abandon the current preferences.

Paul herself also states that people might find the solution of the revelation strategy underwhelming and discusses an objection similar to the one I present here. Thus, her discussion on how to use revelation for the preference-change problem can make a counter-argument to my point. According to Paul, in order to prefer discovering future preferences, one needs to relinquish any current first-order preferences that might conflict with possible future preferences (Paul, 2014, p.121). As it might be the case that we highly value our current preferences and consider them as our foundational, self-defining preferences; admittedly, there is a heavy cost to make a normatively rational decision. Nevertheless, according to Paul, if the preference for revelation is based on a higher-order preference to discover new first-order preferences, and knowing that those may replace some of the current first-order preferences, the strategy can still work. This is to say that when you choose to undergo a transformative experience, you can adopt a “higher-order preference to evolve your preferences”, so you may then decide to let go of your current first-order preferences, since you no longer value them as you did before or at least not “as much as you value discovering the new preferences” (p. 121-122).

Paul's suggestion about higher-order preferences does not solve the 'comparing apples to oranges' problem. Even if one does not strongly prefer to satisfy one's current first-order preferences regarding going to bars and consuming alcoholic drinks, for instance, it does not provide not enough basis to give up on these preferences in order to discover becoming a parent. One can be very curious about a transformative experience and be very unsatisfied with his/her current life—thus, already have a higher-order preference to change the current first-order preferences—but there is no direct relationship between these two facts to infer that the revelatory value of the new life is higher for this person compared to the value of continuing with the current life.

Perhaps we can suppose that if one is really miserable in one's life and have absolutely nothing that satisfies him/her anymore, the revelatory value of a new experience can be the rational basis for that person to undergo a transformative experience. However, having a strong higher-order preference to give up on current first-order preferences does not provide a decision-theoretic basis to compare alternative life-paths. Why adapt your higher-order preference to discover becoming a parent instead of moving to another country? Or vice versa? Even when you already have a higher-order preference to change your current first-order preferences—and your life—you still need case-specific factors to approach your alternatives, which are not incorporated in the revelation strategy.

To sum, what Paul attempts with her suggestions regarding higher-order preferences does not appear as a decision-strategic guideline. It rather appears as a narrative one might need to find courage while taking life-changing steps. Overall, the revelation strategy does not give satisfying decision-theoretic guidance to compare alternative future lives; it also does not change the basis of the decision strongly enough to make the preference-change problem less of a problem and, hence, does not solve it. It is unclear how comparisons can be made between curiosity for new things and one's current state of life with respect to 'revelatory value'.

2.5.3 What is next?

According to Paul (p.54), transformative choices incorporate "epistemically inaccessible subjective values and preference changes". Therefore, subjective decision-making as we know it cannot guide us to make rational transformative choices. On the other hand, the transformative nature of experiences opens a new dimension that we should take into account if we want to overcome the limits of our abilities to rationally evaluate possible

outcomes for transformative experiences (p.62). One suggestion from Paul is the revelation strategy.

I argue that the configuration of transformative choices based on revelation to solve the problems of transformative experiences does not work. Concerning Paul's suggestions to judge the revelatory value, there is no room for case-specific factors. Due to this issue, it is not clear how one can assign a negative value to discovery to not undergo a new experience rationally. Essentially, decision-makers cannot decision-theoretically reject new experiences with the revelation strategy, and there is little room for personal deliberations. In terms of the preference-change problem, there is, again, ambiguity regarding how decision-makers can assess the revelatory values of life-changing experiences to compare the value of discovery of a transformative experience with maintaining their current way of life or with discovering another life-changing experience.

In the end, there are not enough components in the revelation strategy to subjectively and extensively deliberate one's taste for the value of revelation of a transformative experience so that one can rationally approach new experiences and decide whether or not to undergo them. Nevertheless, before leaving the subject, I wish to further discuss how people may be able to evaluate whether they have a taste for revelation. As we are dealing with a continually growing body of new literature, there is a great deal of room to develop its foundations, which is what makes Paul's account attractive to begin with. Consequently, I will introduce the initial critics of Paul (2014) who try to solve the problems of transformative experiences and discuss the issues that they identify in order to investigate what might be a valuable addition to the revelation strategy. Thus, for the next chapter, I have two aims. I will first review and analyse the debates regarding how individuals make transformative choices, doing so in order to make use of their suggestions to explore how to reconfigure the revelation strategy. Secondly—and returning to the general research question of the study—in order to explore the usefulness of this decision-theoretic configuration, I will assess how the revelation strategy, as developed with regard to commentators' points, might solve the problems of transformative experiences.

CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MAKING TRANSFORMATIVE CHOICES WITH THE REVELATION STRATEGY

As illustrated in the second chapter, Paul identifies two problems in her account regarding transformative experiences. One is inaccessibility of the phenomenological character of new experiences, which prevents individuals to assign informed subjective values to the post-transformation outcomes. The second one is the problem of “ex ante decisions made for ex-post subjective values and preferences”, which makes preferences of different future selves incommensurable (Paul, 2015c, p.489). To simplify, the first problem is not knowing what it is like to have a new experience and your taste for it, which we refer to as the information problem. The second one is not knowing how you will change and whether you prefer your transformed self over your current self; we refer to this problem as the preference-change problem. Paul’s main argument concerning these problems is that they prevent individuals from applying standard decision strategies; therefore, new decision-theoretic configurations should be developed if we want to make transformative choices rationally. She indicates that restructuring decision models with regard to the value of revelation might provide a decision-theoretic solution.

Bearing in mind both the two problems and Paul’s arguments, my aim in this thesis is to discuss how individuals can use ‘revelatory value’ to deal with the problems presented by transformative experiences and to make transformative choices. Thus far, I have focused on the shortcomings of the revelation strategy in remedying either problem of transformative experiences and presented my ideas and arguments concerning this in the preceding chapter. The next question to turn our attention to is whether we can improve or eliminate these deficiencies to some degree, and for this step I will focus on the critical responses to Paul’s arguments. In doing so, I will describe and examine how the commentators who attempted to solve the problems of transformative experiences can contribute to reconstructing the revelation strategy in a useful way, after which I can discuss whether this strategy can be implemented as intended by Paul.

In this chapter, I will first provide an overview of the responses to Paul’s work. Following, I will introduce the respondents most relevant to the current study and analyse their arguments, also share Paul’s responses to their criticisms. I will then address what might be inferred from the debates in an attempt to reconstruct the revelation strategy, and

finally, I will discuss if this new construction is useful for approaching the problems and applying normative rationality standards.

3.1 Critical Responses to Transformative Experience

Transformative Experience quickly generated a landslide of critical responses. Before shifting to a detailed examination of specific commentators, I would like to give a general summary of the discussions.

The responses to *Transformative Experience* can be divided into three groups, following the respective main topic of debate. The first group focuses on definitional questions and critically analyses a variety of life-changing experiences with regard to the framework provided by Paul. Among them, Zelcer (2015) discusses how the experience of war can be transformative. Carel, Kidd, and Pettigrew (2016) indicate that Paul's account can be used to characterise the central features of illness as a transformative experience. Kemp (2015) discusses the possibilities of genuine self-transformation in relation to Paul's framework. McKinnon (2015) studies sex transitioning as a form of transformative experience and argues that transition periods should be modelled as well, while Velji (2015) similarly explores transition periods, though he focuses on religious transformation. Their points will go by without explicit elaboration, as they are concerned with other questions than this thesis.

The second group approaches transformative experiences from the viewpoint of standard decision theory. They generally object to Paul's critique of standard decision theories and attempt to conceptualise epistemic uncertainty in a way that it does not pose a threat to the formal framework. Among them, Bykvist and Stefánsson (2017) argue that epistemic transformation does not conflict with standard decision-making, with the possible exception of already indecisive individuals, while Pettigrew (2015) tries to reformulate a decision model in which the transformative aspect does not prevent decision-makers from assigning subjective utilities. Carr (2015) recognises that the issue is not simply one of uncertainty, going on to argue that it can be reformulated in a way that epistemic norms are represented through a decision-theoretic framework. Briggs (2015) introduces tools and frameworks of interpersonal wellbeing analysis to discuss how one may use them for intrapersonal comparisons to confront the preference-change problem.

The third group problematizes Paul's claims concerning the role of subjective value and external information arguing that it is possible to make informed and rational evaluations of transformative experiences. More specifically, Kauppinen (2015) puts forth

that non-experiential subjective values are grounds enough to make life-changing decisions. Similarly, Sharadin (2015) contends that empirical evidence about non-phenomenological character of transformative experiences can help to infer what to expect. Harman (2015) emphasizes the value of testimony in assigning the values of transformative experiences. Dougherty, Horowitz, and Sliwa (2015) argue that epistemic transformation is not the cause of the transformative experience problems. Campbell (2015) asserts that some degree of projection is possible in life-changing decisions, which is sufficient to determine if individuals value a new experience enough to undergo it. Barnes (2015) illustrates two cases where there are more important reasons to not undergo a transformative experience than to avoid revelation. Chang (2015) makes a distinction between event-based transformative choices and choice-based transformative choices and demonstrates what the distinction might suggest pertaining to making informed transformative decisions.

To date, there have been numerous criticisms of Paul's arguments, though there have been positive reception too by those who are interested in exploring the problems she defines in an attempt to improve decision theory. In general, there is currently no certain direction for the discussions to take, nor it is predictable whether defining literature will emerge from the academic conversations on this topic, the primary reason being that there is misunderstanding surrounding Paul's intended meaning when discussing 'subjective values' and how one can be informed about alternative futures. This issue at times misled the responses to her work. On the other hand, in her later work, Paul (2015c) makes another attempt to elucidate her points. Moving forward, future critical debates in regards to the generation of information to assign rational values may be replaced with discussions on how to compare alternative futures under deep epistemic uncertainty, which I consider a more compelling aspect of this account, deserving of more scholarly attention.

As I previously underlined, Paul criticizes decision theories for the inadequacy of their framework to deal with transformative experiences. She also states that the type of decision theory that interests her is 'normative', so transformative decisions do not have to perfectly conform with the standard models as long as the deliberations of individuals when considering transformative decisions correspond to the normative standard of rationality. That is, decision-makers are not required to assign the expected value of their alternatives explicitly, so long as they are able to evaluate which alternative would most likely yield a higher benefit. Consequently, for such cases, she considers the revelation strategy a viable option, effective in producing a solution for the decision-maker. She discusses the revelation strategy to suggest a decision-theoretic solution specifically for the use of actual decision-

makers, not for theorists, per se. Accordingly, although the second group of respondents' comments are more directly related to decision theory, as they aim to maintain the formal framework with their work, their arguments will generally go by without focus. Nevertheless, Briggs' suggestion to make intrapersonal comparisons will surface again when examining personal transformation and the preference-change problem.

As a final note, one respondent pays particular attention to the revelation idea in his discussion. Shupe (2015) finds fault in the revelation strategy for its inadequacy to help decision-makers who are in a position compelling them to make transformative decisions for someone other than themselves. In his opinion, Paul's approach concentrates too much on preferences and excludes any consideration people might have for the wellbeing of others. His points, although valuable, are not directly linked to the argument I aim to make in this thesis, so I will not address them in the following section.

As they discuss how transformative experiences can be evaluated and how external information may be of use in solving the problems of transformative choices, I turn my focus to the third group. In order to explore if their suggestions are decision theoretically viable, I, again, divide the focus to isolate each problem. For the information problem, I will present two accounts, those of Harman and Dougherty et al. (hereafter DHS).¹² I will discuss how to reconfigure the revelation strategy with respect to their arguments, so that it may be used to solve the information problem. After that, I will explore whether it can also be effective in solving the preference-change problem. Continuing with the preference-change problem, I will deconstruct Barnes' critique. Accordingly, in the next section, I will present the works of Harman and DHS and consider any solutions they might propose for the information problem of transformative experiences.

3.2 Gathering Information Under Epistemic Uncertainty

3.2.1 The case of Mystery Box and testimonial evidence

As described by Harman (2015, p.323), there are indeed transformative experiences that fit Paul's description, such as seeing a new colour for the first time; however, she disagrees that becoming a parent is one of those experiences. She accepts that people cannot know the range of possibilities in advance regarding what their parenthood experience may be like, but they can learn about particular possibilities, such as having an easy pregnancy or the possibility of post-partum depression, by gathering information from people with

¹² The critical points made by the authors from this group, especially on the role of external information, can be quite repetitive. Hence, instead of summarizing the similar main points of five authors, I decided to select the two that appeared to have more clear and useful arguments for my project.

personalities similar to theirs (p.327-328). People with children can share the value they find in being a parent, and the prospective parents can reflect on this information when considering their life-changing decision. Although those sharing their views on parenthood are providing accounts of their subjective experiences, Harman believes that there can still be ‘purely normative information’ to be gleaned from their statements (p.330). In addition, an expert can tell you that people with your personality type described having a richer life after having a child, and if this information is true and you believe it to be true, it is can be the information you base your decision on.

To give a paradigmatic example, Harman argues that if everyone who experiences something called the Mystery Box expresses that it is a wonderful experience—as long as they do not seem to be deluded—then the next person can know in advance that it will be a wonderful experience. If everyone claims that they had a horrible experience after opening the Mystery Box, then the next person can rationally judge that it will be horrible for him/her too. Testimony is how one can be informed of the value of having a new experience and, in this respect, believing whether an experience would be wonderful or horrible based on testimony is epistemically justified (p.328-329).

One problem with relying on testimony is that one needs to be cautious of ‘I will be glad I did it’ reasoning (Harman, 2009). People might have preferences for their current outcomes, even if those are results of poor decision-making or mistaken reasoning (Harman, 2015, p.332-333). Take, for example, a teen mother who loves her child; she does not regret keeping the pregnancy, though she also does not think that choosing to be a teen mother was a wise decision. However, Harman does not consider this issue to trivialise the value of testimonial evidence in knowing the value of someone’s life. She underlines that we need to understand if the person’s judgment contains genuine reflection on both the positive and negative aspects of her life, while simultaneously being aware of what might have been positive or negative if she instead had followed an alternative path (p.337-338). Parents might state that their children have improved their lives because, as parents, they prefer being parents. Yet, we can determine if their lives have actually been worsened after having children (p.338). According to Harman, this kind of reflection can even illuminate the comparative value of two different life paths.

It is worth mentioning, in her responses, Paul stresses that she does not claim that individuals cannot make any inference about a transformative experience whatsoever before having had their own experience. Additionally, people can reason whether or not to undergo an experience based on testimony. However, in her view, testimony is descriptive and

cannot provide the information that individuals need to compare alternative futures with respect to expected subjective values before making an irreversible commitment that would fundamentally change their lives (Paul, 2015c, p.486). Simply identifying ‘I will be glad I did it’ reasoning is not a solution to this matter, as the deeper problem with transformative decision-making is not that people express mixed emotions about their attachment to their first-order preferences, it is that their higher-order preferences change (p.523). If people express that their choice was not a good one, just as the teen mother, although they do not wish to change their lives, this means that their higher-order preferences stayed the same. The higher-order preference of the teen mother is to not be a teen mother, although she prefers her current state of motherhood. In this sense, it is not faulty reasoning that limits the informatory power of testimony. Instead, we see that, following a transformative experience, people’s hierarchies of value and preference can change entirely. For example, that childhood friend who always dreamed of becoming a rock star and touring the world starts to talk about ‘more important things in life’ after having his/her own child. From this, it is clear that Harman’s discussion on the value of testimony remains unconvincing and, therefore, fails to provide valuable input to improve the revelation strategy.

As Harman does not address normative standards of rationality or decision theory, it is unclear what her position is on individuals’ ability to rely on testimony to apply standard rationality and to establish value functions with respect to their expected subjective values. Despite the issues, her paper is useful in making two clarifications. First of all, Paul (2014, p.27-28) underlines that she sets aside the cases where people do not need to first-personally project what an experience is like to make sound judgments about these experiences’ effects on their future wellbeing. If the outcome of an experience improves (or negatively impacts) the wellbeing of all, given the assumption that everyone has the same preferences for the relevant change, the decision does not have to be based on cognitive modelling and personal reflections of the individuals (p.54). As an example, one does not need to experience a shark attack to discover that it would have negative effects. For practical reasons—namely, survival—one can assign a negative value to it. However, people can rarely be so sure about how to respond to a new experience. Sometimes they receive a spectrum of responses from people regarding a specific experience, sometimes they think they might respond differently than the majority of people, and sometimes the decision situation is too peculiar to apply general principles (p. 28). Thus, there is no concrete way of relying on external evidence for many of the transformative experiences that people encounter in their lives. The Mystery

Box example is not representative enough to illustrate how to handle those of the decision-making situations.

Secondly, Paul (2015a, p.164) does not contend that knowing the value of a transformative experience is metaphysically impossible. The Experience Machine (Nozick, 1974) could help you understand what it is like to have any given transformative experience. We can also assume one has a clone that makes a transformative decision and then shares the results. Likewise, we can suppose that there is an advisor whom we trust and act on his/her suggestions. In real life, however there are no Experience Machines, cloning companies, or advisors who can never be wrong, hence, constructing such solutions is not productive.

There are two more points I will address before moving on. Firstly, even though the Mystery Box example is not representative of the general features of transformative experiences, alongside the shark example, it reveals that not all transformative experiences require knowing ‘what it is like’ for one to make a rational decision. There are methods of evaluation unrelated to the phenomenological character of transformative experiences to aid the decision-maker in rationally choosing whether or not to undergo an experience. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that the problems of transformative experience, which do not require phenomenological knowledge in order to make rational evaluations, can be solved via different approaches. The revelation strategy can be one method of evaluation when considering transformative choices if the phenomenological character of the experience is not foremost in the mind of the decision-maker.

Secondly, Harman’s account emphasizes the importance of testimonial evidence for the decision-makers, which is actually an informal source of external evidence; though Paul does not completely disagree, she grades it a very limited informatory power. Although I argue that Harman’s points are not convincing, as I argue that the parameters of the revelation strategy are too narrow to incorporate different degrees of revelation based on different ways of making case-specific inferences, I will return to discussing how one might use external sources of information in my critical comments.

3.2.2 Partial knowledge and alternative transformative decision formations

DHS (2015, p.302) argue that life-changing decisions are indeed difficult for decision theory but the difficulty is not due to epistemic transformation. They make a distinction between ‘knowing *what it’s like* to have an experience and rationally estimating *how valuable* that experience is’. While they do not reject that the ‘what it is like’ value cannot

be known before undergoing a particular experience, they state that it¹³ can rationally be estimated by gathering information, be it scientific evidence or testimony. In addition, past experiences with similarities to new experiences can help to generate partial knowledge, which can then be used to assess how desirable the new experience is.

DHS shares the example of the Mystery Closet, like Harman, and argue that if an experience is considered to be a positive experience by everyone who underwent it, then, the next person could find intrinsic value in this experience too (p.308). According to them, real world examples of the Mystery Closet can be extreme pleasure or pain. It is not necessary to undergo torture to estimate a disvalue for it. Of course, testimony can be at times contradictory or vague, but we can observe whether people appear happy and satisfied with their experiences. With respect to our observations, we can make inferences regarding whether their experiences have intrinsic value (p.311-312). The ideas I presented when discussing the Mystery Box and the value of testimony above are relevant and also apply here.

One of DHS' central critiques of Paul is that, according to them, Paul's approach challenges the decision-theoretic process of any decision that involves one or more epistemically transformative experiences, as they argue that her critique implies that no rational decision can be made about epistemically transformative experiences. As nearly all practical decisions involve epistemically transformative experiences, DHS presumes that if we adopt Paul's view, none of these decisions can be made rationally. As an example, if Mary from the black and white room decides to leave her room to go on a date because she thinks that this date increases her prospects of becoming a parent, "decision theory requires her to assign a utility to the outcomes in which she becomes a parent" (p.306). Conversely, DHS argue that epistemic transformation does not mean we can never apply decision theory and make rational decisions. The phenomenological character of an experience is not necessary to be aware of its value. People can generate partial knowledge by looking for similarities between a new experience and past experiences, which can assist individuals in discerning their preferences towards a new experience.

As an example, if one learns that Vegemite is intensely salty and savoury and if one dislikes such food, then one can know that tasting Vegemite would not be an intrinsically valuable experience for him/her (p.312-313). DHS argue that Mary can also make predictions about seeing red to estimate whether she would like that experience. If Mary

¹³ At (p305), they state that this value should be understood as 'utility value'. Later (p.308), they also begin to talk about 'intrinsic values' when they address the value of epistemically transformative experiences, which is why I do not use a fixed terminology when introducing their points.

values having a richer understanding of other people's experiences, has aesthetic sensibility for unconventionally beautiful sights, and an adventurous spirit, she can rationally estimate that seeing red is an epistemically transformative visual that is shared by many of people, so it will also be of value to her.

Overall, while, according to Paul, in order to judge the subjective value of an outcome, one needs to know what the experience is like, DHS say that this premise relies on "a restricted view about what counts as the admissible evidence concerning the value of experiences" (p.314). People can make rational decisions about undergoing new experiences without consulting their phenomenological character; yet, when it comes to high-stake cases that cause preferences-changes, such as the decision to become a parent, DHS are in agreement with Paul. Nevertheless, they claim that epistemic transformation is an irrelevant aspect of that decision problem (p.314).

More arguments challenging to the role of subjective values and the problems with epistemic uncertainty are found among other responses. The critics are heavily unconvinced by the central role Paul gives to subjective values in transformative decision-making. Similar to DHS and Harman, Kauppinen (2015), Sharadin (2015), and Chang (2015) challenge Paul's propositions regarding how one can know the value of transformative experiences. In her response, Paul (2015c) counters that their attempts to undermine her construction of subjective value and its role in informed decision-making are grounded in false inferences and reclarifies her arguments on subjective values.

I will not focus any further on the details of these debates, as the question that concerns us is not whether the problems Paul addresses are actual problems. Taken the idea for granted that our ability to make first-personal evaluations to build rational value functions regarding new and fundamentally alien experiences is limited, what interests this thesis is how to generate relevant and sufficient information in other ways to make rational value assessments about transformative experiences. Thus, I will continue my critique without reflecting on critical interaction. Consequently, to move on in evaluating the critics of Transformative Experience, in the next section, I will return to DHS' paper and the points I made about Harman's critique.

3.2.3 Critical reflection on the discussion points

DHS first suppose that in Paul's framework, no rational decision can be made under epistemic uncertainty, then, they present alternative decision formations to deal with epistemically transformative experiences rationally with regard to partial knowledge. Paul

gives credit to DHS' points on partial knowledge and states that their characterisation of Mary's decision to go on a date presents a new and interesting puzzle, but she does not discuss it further (Paul, 2015c, p.505). Although Paul does not say more, I argue that their supposition about the extent of Paul's challenge to decision-theory is incorrect.

In transformative experience framework, Mary can rationally evaluate 'increasing her chances to become a parent' without assigning a subjective value to becoming a parent per se. For the former, it is sufficient to first-personally deliberate what it is like to increase one's chances. If Mary can subjectively deliberate that she is more likely to become a parent by going on dates to find a partner than by not going on dates and staying single, when Mary assigns a positive value to her date because she values 'increasing her chances of becoming a parent', she is making a rational evaluation in accordance with decision-theoretic standards. Paul does not appear to claim otherwise. The standard that she wants to apply is 'normative', which does not require decision-makers to possess a clear vision of their life goals and have well-constructed value spaces for every possible outcome before entering a decision-making process. In addition, in (2015a), to present her approach, Paul first sketches a choice 'scenario', in which, deliberations regarding the alternatives are essentially aimed at assessing the subjective value of the phenomenological character of becoming a parent so that the decision-maker can form a preference-order.

Although I posit that Paul's approach does not produce an overall challenge to decision-theories, as DHS supposes, the critique by DHS raises an interesting question: Does the phenomenological character of an experience have the same central role for every transformative decision? With their formation of Mary's decision, DHS note that the phenomenological character of transformative experiences does not have the same role in different decisions and partial knowledge can help to make certain decisions involving epistemically transformative experiences. Considering all of Paul's arguments about individuals' inability to grasp subjective values granted, it is plausible that Mary's choice to see red in fact might not actually be about what it is like to see the colour red. There can indeed be different formations of decisions that incorporate transformative experiences, and the information problem of some of which can be resolved without deliberating about the phenomenological character of new experience.

Consider the example of a colour blind individual who desperately wants to be a pilot. If there is an operation that can help him/her to see green so that he/she can be a pilot, from the sense that undergoing the operation will help to satisfy the preference of becoming a pilot, it should be a rational choice, even though the subject of the choice is a

transformative experience.¹⁴ Maybe this individual knows that 80% of people who had the operation to see green became successful pilots, while 20% became confused with the introduction of the new colour and lost their taste for their original preference. Still, since the individual is unable to fly a plane in the pre-operation state, he/she should be able to assign a positive value that the operation will increase the likelihood to achieve his/her goal and rationally choose to undergo it. Following a similar line of reasoning, if one is hungry and there is by chance only durian fruit in the kitchen, the preference to eat it to satisfy the hunger should count as a rational decision that does not require subjective deliberation regarding what durian tastes like, as long as one has the information that durian is a food.

We can come up with examples of decisions concerning transformative experiences that are made under structures that are not based on the subjective values of what it is like to experience them. This point relates to my final idea on Harman's paper, that different transformative experiences might raise different issues and can be resolved in different ways. The Mystery Box example that both Harman and DHS present, alongside with the shark example, has a different resolution than Paul's scenario of becoming a parent. Mary's decision to see red can have different resolutions with regard to the different motivations Mary might have to want to see red in the first place. In that sense, it is reasonable to assume that valuing revelation can be the basis of some transformative choices and the revelation strategy can be the decision-theoretic guidance to inform such choices.

The question remains how to identify experience-specific revelatory value. I argued in the previous chapter that the revelation strategy lacks the room for decision-makers to incorporate case-specific factors to assess the value of discovery. About this regard, the commentators correctly focus on one important gap in Paul's framework. She fails to clarify how external information may be incorporated in transformative decisions. Even if one agrees that external information and testimony cannot help individuals to know about the phenomenological character of new experiences, the question remains what those are good for exactly. Though external data cannot be used to reveal one his/her value space, individuals still must rely heavily on it when creating their perception of the external world.

Accordingly, I posit that defining an explicit role for external information, in addition to establishing the scope of its use, is crucial in solving the information problem of transformative choices under a decision-theoretic configuration. I argue that if the revelatory value of transformative experiences can be assigned through the use of external data and

¹⁴ For the sake of this argument, we can assume that the operation does not involve any health risks.

testimonial evidence, it is possible for a reconfiguration to more appropriately deal with the information problem. The next section will illustrate this point further.

3.2.4 The use of external information in deliberating the revelatory value

If we suppose that external information feeds individuals' curiosity and thus shapes their perception towards new experiences, then we can too suppose that it is external information on which their preference for revelation is based. Accordingly, I posit that external information can be what individuals use to determine the degrees of desirability of having new experiences revealed, as having information that is 'merely descriptive' can be sufficient to create an informed preference for discovering new experiences, though it does not permit the individual to grasp the nature of those experiences. To illustrate this point further, I will now present two ways that external information can be used to assess revelatory value.

One way is that external information can be used to simply identify which transformative experiences are available to undergo. If a transformative experience is available for the decision-maker, that is one case-specific positive value he/she can assign to revelation of that transformative experience. As an example, supposing that you have not begun your music education before the age of twelve, scientific data demonstrates that becoming a member of a symphony orchestra is not available to you, as you cannot develop your musical skills and master your instrument as much as you need to be able to join a symphony orchestra. Since this career path is not available for you to discover, there is no need to prepare for and pursue it. You can rationally conclude that there is nothing of worth in following that career path, as the venture will only end in disappointment and failure, without having any further deliberations about what it is like to be a member of a symphony orchestra and you can assign it a non-positive revelatory value.

The second way is that, among the available transformative experiences—while decision-makers cannot imagine the outcomes—revelatory value can be assigned based on the the likelihood of specific outcomes. If there is an 80% chance that Mary will enjoy seeing red and a 20% chance that she will not enjoy it, if she values discovering that she enjoys experiencing a new colour, then she can rationally undergo the experience for its revelatory value. Assigning revelatory value to the likelihoods of specific outcomes is also illustrative of the decision-making process of choosing abstinence. Let us assume that Mary has never used hard drugs or consumed alcohol. Although she does not know first-hand what it is like to be an addict or an alcoholic, she assigns negative values to the revelation of

these outcomes, which demonstrates that she does not want to find out what it is like to be an addict or an alcoholic. However, she is also curious about drugs and alcohol, wonders what it is like to be under their effects. If external data estimates that there is an 80% chance that she will become an addict after getting high for the first time and a 10% chance that the same will happen after getting drunk for the first time, Mary can assign a lower revelatory value to hard drugs compared to alcohol. If she ever decides to have a substance-related experience to satisfy her curiosity for their affects, she can prefer alcohol to drugs—and abstain from drugs—based on the higher revelatory value that she assigns to the ‘safer’ outcome that her alternatives incorporate.

Note that in our reconfiguration of the revelation strategy, the focus of the decision is neither grasping nor ‘discovering’ the phenomenological character of a new experience. This is a rather partial analysis (with regard to suggestions from DHS) of one aspect of new experiences to determine whether or not they correspond to the current preferences and/or concerns of the individual. If it is the case that the information generated thusly sufficiently addresses an individual’s questions regarding a new experience—for instance, answering whether this new experience would violate some of his/her current preferences—they can rationally judge whether to undergo it.

Overall, the reconfigured revelation strategy can be used to solve the information problem if two conditions are met: (1) the decision-makers identify curiosity for revelation as their primary reason for undergoing a transformative experience and (2) the specific transformative experience that they choose allows this consideration to be the rational basis of their decision. Although the reconfiguration has a narrow scope and can only be applied in a very specific formation of transformative choices, it involves more case-specific and individual-specific information regarding transformative experiences that can be useful for the decision-makers.

Even after defining the scope and new guidelines of the strategy, questions remain: Is this configuration merely a more nuanced version of the standard approach? Are we only changing the narrative of decisions in order to make transformative decisions again conform to the models of the standard approaches, or are we actually developing a useful solution? When decision-makers are bounded by questions regarding what it would be like to undergo a specific transformative experience, it is doubtful that a revelation strategy, as I configured, can ‘fill the gap between impersonal data and the personal perspective’ (Paul, 2014, p.133). Nevertheless, it may be able to generate partial knowledge and solve the information problem for some epistemically transformative experiences, in cases where the decision-

makers do not need personal deliberations about the phenomenological characters of the relevant outcomes.

What about more fundamental decisions, life-changing decisions? Can reconfigured revelation strategy solve the preference-change problem? Unfortunately, the inadequacy of the revelation strategy regarding how to weigh alternative life paths against each other is not resolved under the new configuration that we discussed, as we only focused on how to better evaluate the revelatory value. To give an example, suppose Mary values the revelation of becoming a parent with a caring partner, a full-time nanny and a five-bedroom apartment more than the alternative scenarios that involve parenthood. Even when her criteria is fulfilled, we cannot conclude that discovering being a parent under such terms will make Mary better-off compared to continuing with her current life or compared to using her resources to follow another path. When encountering with preference-change, trade-offs occur, hence, revelatory value by itself cannot straightforwardly contribute to the wellbeing of the decision-maker to be his/her decisions' only or most relevant basis. To further elaborate on this, I will share Barnes' critique on the revelation strategy in the next section.

3.3 Deciding on the Value of Preference-Change

If undergoing a new experience changes preferences, can we form rational preferences by assigning values to discovering the new preferences while making life-changing decisions? Thus far, I have discussed how assigning revelatory values with regard to external data may be able to solve the information problem in the case of some transformative choices. However, Paul seeks to use the revelation strategy to produce a solution to the preference-change problem, in accordance with the normative standard of rationality. This section will directly challenge her position and argue that configuring a strategy based on the revelatory value cannot solve the preference-change problem and, therefore, cannot generate the decision-theoretic guidance to make life-changing decisions. The reflections one has on the value of one's current preferences cannot be suitably represented in a framework that focuses solely on how one can approach new experiences. On the other hand, those reflections have a crucial role in people's evaluations about preference-changing, and, therefore, life-changing decisions. Consequently, I will first introduce Barnes, who contends that one can rationally decline to undergo a transformative experience without the need to deliberate about new preferences or the revelatory value of transformation. Following, I will

present Paul's response and reflect on their debate, emphasising Barnes' claim that the revelatory value is not primarily important when individuals evaluate their lives and preferences. Then, I will suggest that dealing with the preference-change problem calls for comparative analysis of wellbeing.

3.3.1 A different perspective on the preference-change problem

Barnes (2015) remarks that although she is persuaded by many of Paul's arguments, she is not convinced by the claim that we cannot rationally abstain from an experience if we do not know what it would be like for us. According to Barnes, one can rationally make a decision regarding a transformative experience like parenthood with objective reasons and without assigning the subjective values of the alternative futures both with and without children (p.778). One might want to avoid having children due to financial hardship, for example. Barnes also illustrates how she had no desire to have a child and how absurd it would be for her to have a child she did not want (p.775-776). She stresses that if one does not want children and cannot find any reasons to want children, his/her evaluation of the experience of having children should be considered rational, even though he/she has never had children and is thus unable to know what it is like to have children (p.785-786). That is, when an individual does not have any reservations in terms of satisfying his/her current preferences, there is no preference-change problem regarding his/her decision to continue his/her current life.

Barnes also strongly emphasises that the revelatory value of having children is irrelevant to the line of reasoning of the individual at hand as it is a choice of maintaining his/her current preferences. While the individual might be ignorant of some subjective values of having children, based on his/her current sense of self, his/her desire to continue having his/her current preferences determines that he/she should not have children at that time. In that sense, if there is no preference-change problem, then there is no need for revelatory evaluations either (Barnes, 2015, p.785).

To clarify her points, Barnes reminds us of Winston, the main character of George Orwell's infamous dystopic vision, *1984*. In the novel, Winston tries to avoid being detained by the Thought Police because they brainwash the citizens who oppose the order and/or do not conform. When people are arrested by the Thought Police and brainwashed, they become happy and obedient members of the order, devoted to Big Brother. In the shark attack example, there is most probably no one who speaks highly of the experience, but here, people who are brainwashed express that it is an amazing experience. Thus, Winston

has strong reasons to believe that his negative feelings towards the outcome of being brainwashed, in addition to all of his current preferences, would change after undergoing it. However, knowing that his preferences will change makes him keen to avoid being brainwashed, as his current preferences are part of what define him as a person and he does not want to lose his identity as an individual, even though he is aware that after the transformation he would be content with his new life. Barnes underlines that Winston does not need to have phenomenological awareness regarding the experience of being brainwashed to know what it would entail for his values and preferences (p.781).

According to Barnes, Winston rejects this transformation simply because he values his current self and values. He neither uses the revelation strategy nor needs it to make rational considerations (p.783-784). The possibility of transformation strongly threatens his current preferences, which is why he chooses to abstain. His preference is even irrelevant to revelation; Winston does not choose to avoid the experience of being brainwashed because he is not interested in the new experience. He does not want to be captured by the Thought Police for the reason that it would mean that the things that matter to him now would lose their importance. According to Barnes, having children is similar to being brainwashed in this aspect. It can be a strong violation of one's current preferences, and while one can predict that his/her preferences will change after he/she becomes a parent, this may seem like a horrible development with respect to what he/she values and prefers currently about his/her life.

Barnes also criticizes Paul for demanding an overly objective stance to approach one's preferences. She asserts that there is no rational way for an individual to evaluate his/her future preferences, if those violate his/her current preferences from his/her first-personal perspective. In that sense, she accepts that there is indeed a preference-change problem. However, she argues that people cannot maintain a preference-free position to approach alternative futures when one of them will clearly bring outcomes that violate their current values and sense of self (p.785-786). Hence, she justifies prioritizing the current self's preferences as a solution to the problem.

3.3.2 Preserving one's preferences or cognitive impairment

Paul (2015b) responds to Barnes' critique by stating that some choices require some degree of self-projection, while others do not (p.804). She agrees that Winston is indeed rational in preferring his current preferences but claims that it is because "mental autonomy has objective moral and social value" (p.803). In cases such as drug addiction or joining a cult,

it is rational for one to avoid such mind-altering processes. Becoming a parent, on the other hand, does not result in loss of mental faculties; instead, it involves preference changes for different reasons (p.804). Overall, Paul insists that one can reject a new experience on the basis of revelation by simply prioritising his/her current preferences over discovery of the new ones.

She also states that she acknowledges the validity of questioning, “Should I, from the perspective of my current self with her current preferences, regard any dramatic change of my preferences, especially transformative changes to my core personal preferences, as a kind of cognitive impairment?” (p.806). Paul continues by stating that if we regard transformative changes as cognitive impairment, then there is a potential for conservatism, leading one to decide to never leave his/her small town, go to college, or travel the world. She asks where to draw the line when prioritizing current preferences over future ones and admits that she does not have the answer:

How are we to weight our local utility functions over time when framing and contemplating the possibility of transformative change, especially when those future changes are first-personally inaccessible to us (p.806)?

I disagree with Paul that we need to regard transformation as a form of cognitive impairment to be able to make sense of one’s preference to preserve his/her current preferences and sense of self. I do not expect that this was the intended direction of Barnes’ arguments either. As I interpret it, Barnes underlines that how much we value our current life has a more central role in our evaluation of life-changing experiences than how appealing new experiences seem to us. Simply, Barnes points out that even if an individual does not expect the outcomes of a transformative decision to be unpleasant, he/she might still want to avoid it due to the reason that he/she is not looking for a change.

In her response, Paul ignores the emphasis Barnes places on the effect of the satisfaction one gets from one’s current life on his/her attitude towards life-changing decisions. However, her reemphasis on the use of revelation strategy falls short of capturing the decision problem that Barnes presents. Individuals naturally make assessments about how content they are with their current life before making life-changing decisions. The greater the satisfaction one gets from one’s current life and preferences, the greater investments one has initially made to get his/her current state, and the greater expected returns one has, the harder it should be for that person to make a life-changing decision. In

one sense, we might agree that there is a potential for conservatism in this line of thinking as Paul points out. However, the conservatism here is not motivated by one's reserved feelings against new experiences or against future local utility functions. It is rather motivated by the effort one has already put into becoming who he/she is and to have the life he/she currently has. In that sense, the revelatory value of leaving one's small town or travelling the world can be a significant factor for an individual's decision process if he/she starts to look for a change perhaps because of a diminishing expected returns from staying in his/her current state. However, if people assign a positive value to discovery of a new experience but decide to remain in their current circumstances, these decisions cannot be represented rationally with the revelation strategy, which is to say that the role of the satisfaction one gets his/her current life cannot generally be represented by the revelation strategy.

In this chapter until now, we have evaluated the critical feedback on transformative experiences and attempted to reconfigure the revelation strategy with respect to the debates. I argued that the revelation strategy could simplify the information problem. However, as we moved to the discussion on issues of preference-change, we saw that revelation strategy is unequipped to incorporate the extent of the preference-change problem. It cannot capture the costs of personally transformative experiences, and the comparison of preferences across selves is in need of a more sophisticated evaluation. Although this concludes the discussion on this approach, in the next section, I will discuss what future contributions could be made to the literature to handle the preference-change problem with regard to the response that Briggs (2015) gave to Paul.

3.3.3 A suggestion for future research

Paul (2015a, p.153) argues that in case of personally transformative experiences, the main relevant outcome is the phenomenological character of experience and all the dispositions it involves. Thus, the value of undergoing transformation depends on the 'what it is like' character of the experience at hand. I presented in the section above that another very relevant outcome of preference-change is the trade-off that the new experiences come with. I argued that approaching the preference-change problem requires more elaborative analysis than Paul suggests with the revelation strategy. In this section, I posit that more relevant basis to approach the preference-change problem can be found in Briggs' (2015) work on making use of interpersonal utility and wellbeing analysis methods to make intrapersonal comparisons.

Briggs (2015, p.194) maintains that, although in epistemic transformation ‘‘there are no objectively correct preferences’’, the preference-change problem of how to navigate between one’s current and transformed selves is normative. She points out that preferences are not only dispositions towards choice; they are also comparative evaluations (p.190). Thus, one’s wellbeing does not only depend on local level of preference-satisfaction. In addition Briggs (p.209) points out that preferences themselves ‘‘provide a reason for valuing the objects preferred’’ even though people systematically make errors when they deliberate their preferences. If we agree that the errors about preferring a specific set of preferences are the problem for any preference-satisfaction strategy, then, transformative decisions are not special cases in that sense, thus, the problem of prioritizing current preferences or future is not any more irrational than usual. Accordingly, we can suppose that they do not require any strategic approach other than the current ones. As such, Briggs is optimistic that the overview she presents is able to provide possible solutions to compare alternative preference-sets and the satisfaction levels they bring. Although Briggs’ suggestions are not suitable to be depicted in a framework that focuses on revelation, they can contribute the attempts to find new directions to make transformative decisions.

Preference satisfaction theories base their wellbeing analysis on the assumption that people are better off in situations which they prefer. Thus, the theorists’ aim is to compare wellbeing across individuals based on the individuals’ own preferences. There are three types of comparisons, categorised as such: Level comparisons, unit comparisons, and zero comparisons (p.193).¹⁵ Briggs (p.214) argues that in the case of intrapersonal comparisons, in order to make assessments about undergoing a transformation, one can make level analysis, which means to judge how well the unchanged preferences would be satisfied compared to how well the changed preferences would be satisfied. Or one can make unit analysis, meaning that one evaluates what local differences a change makes in one’s life (p.214). According to Briggs, comparing different levels of preference satisfaction across different future scenarios does pertain to transformative choices, especially when one chooses to not undergo a transformation (p.195). Yet, in order to decide when it is worth the risk to undergo a transformation, one needs unit analysis in addition to level analysis to compare the costs his/her choice entails (p.196).

¹⁵ Level comparisons aim for individuals to be made equally well off, so, for instance, this includes policies which advocate for the most disadvantaged members of society. Unit comparisons seek to maximise total utility, focusing on which available option produces more utility for different people with respect to the costs and benefits of the available options. Zero comparisons examine whether introducing more people is positive or negative for the total utility of worlds with different levels of population (Briggs, 2015, p.194).

Another solution that Briggs discusses is *rigidifying strategy*, in which a preference order is established and it is assumed that the wellbeing of all depends on the extent to which they are able to satisfy that privileged order. In the case of transformative choices, Briggs supposes that the natural set of preferences would be the current preferences, not those from the individuals' counter-factual scenarios (p.212-213). That is, if you are satisfied with your current preferences, your decision to continue in that way must be rational; a contrary claim would violate the assumption that people are better off in the scenarios that they prefer. However, she underscores that rigidifying which set of preferences can be arbitrary and based on intuitive judgments.

3.4 Final Remarks: Where Does This Leave the Revelation Strategy?

Life decisions can be extremely challenging. In daily decisions, if we want to make the 'best' decision possible, we can evaluate our possible alternatives with respect to their compatibility with our means, abilities, and desires. The outcomes of such decisions generally do not irreversibly impact the course of our lives. When it comes to decisions that might have such significant impacts, evaluating the alternatives can be troubling. It is not easy to decide what exactly we want to do with our lives. What is a good life for us? How can we 'follow our dreams' if we do not know for sure what we want to pursue? Nor are we able to foresee precisely how a particular decision would serve (or distract from) our life goals. Suppose we are convinced that the life we want to lead is an adventurous life; what can be considered 'adventure', and what is a waste of time? Furthermore, our opinions on which dreams to follow might change in time. Most of us probably had a different view on what constitutes a good life when we were in high school. If we are not living in accordance with our beliefs from when we were teenagers, does it mean that we failed to realise our dreams and life goals? Perhaps we have since developed a better opinion or just a 'different' opinion on what a good life entails. Decisions that affect the course of our lives can be particularly hard when they are 'life-changing', as their outcomes alter our tastes, deliberations, and the paths we choose to follow.

The standard solution of decision theories for anyone who wants to make the 'best' decision possible is to decide in accordance with the rationality norms. Accordingly, decision-makers should first list possible alternatives and then assign subjective values to them with regard to the degree to which they prefer each. Based on these values and the probabilities of achieving each alternative, the decision-makers should have their expected

subjective values space and a preference order upon which to decide. In this way, they can make the most rational decision.

Some time ago, it came to the attention of decision theorists that real-life decision-makers cannot be textbook rational (Simon, 1982). For one, they have the problem of lack of information and cannot be expected to perfectly estimate the likelihood of the best alternative to improve their wellbeing. Although in most standard accounts, tastes and preferences are not subjects of uncertainty (they are assumed to be invariant), more recently, decision theory has also been occupied with the question of how deep uncertainty also about decision-makers' own tastes can be represented (Bradley, 2017).

Paul (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c) questions whether individuals are able to rationally deliberate their decisions that might fundamentally change their core preferences and selves. Her analysis not only incorporates a critique of traditional decision theoretic assumptions, but it also challenges some of the most deeply rooted norms of modern society, such as the notions of self-fulfilment, reaching one's potential, and making the best of one's life by following one's dreams. Paul notes that decisions about new experiences embody uncertainty of tastes and preferences due to their transformative aspects that prevent decision-makers from following the decision theoretic procedures to make rational evaluations. These decisions, especially if they are life-changing, require new strategies and configurations in order to apply the normative standards of rationality and solve their problems.

Grounded in Paul's suggestion regarding the use of revelation to reconfigure life-changing decisions, the goal of this research was to analytically discuss the limits of making life-changing decisions rationally with regard to one's taste for discovery, concluding that such an approach misses how much our propositions on how to live our lives to reach maximum self-fulfilment depend on our ability to master the resources that we have, which include our already existing tastes and preferences and the current life that we built with our past decisions. In that sense, evaluation of discovery is an insufficient basis to serve as a standard of rationality to make life-changing decisions. Nevertheless, the discussion on revelation is promising. Although I argue that instructing individuals on how to assign the most valued paths to discover cannot be framed under a revelation-focused decision-theoretic structure, it can still be useful in yielding meaningful/rational approaches to handle uncertainties that will less severely impact their lives.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Paul studies how people make rational life-changing decisions regarding whether or not to undergo transformative experiences, which will alter their core values and preferences. She identifies two modes of transformation, which are likely to occur as a result of new experiences. The first is epistemic transformation, when you have access to new knowledge. The second is personal transformation, when the fundamental characteristics that define you change due to the new experience. Additionally, Paul discusses two problems transformative experiences cause for decision-makers. The first is the information problem, in which individuals cannot grasp the phenomenological character of new experiences before undergoing them, resulting in the inability to correctly judge the information they gather in order to determine if they will have a taste for the outcomes of the new experience. The second problem is that, prior to making rational decisions regarding their lives, individuals cannot imaginatively project themselves under different future outcomes to assess whether they prefer their current or future selves (p. 492-493). As they cannot access the future self's first-personal perspective to consider whether they prefer who they will become after the transformative experience, they cannot have a complete preference-order between the different selves. This is the preference-change problem.

Paul argues that normative decision theory cannot guide individuals in the problems discussed in her work. That is, individuals cannot make rational transformative decisions, as they cannot apply the normative decision-making rules due to the two problems of transformative experiences. Nevertheless, she argues that we can develop new decision-theoretic strategies to apply the normative standard of rationality when making life-changing decisions. The decision-theoretic guide that Paul suggests is grounded in the idea that people can choose to undergo new experiences for the sake of revelation. With the revelation strategy, if decision-makers have a taste for new experiences, they can rationally prefer to undergo new experiences based on the value of the knowledge that new experiences contain. If new experiences cause preference-change, decision-makers can also base their decision on their preference to change their preferences, still using the revelation strategy to make rational transformative decisions.

In this thesis, I argue that the attempt to solve the problems of transformative experiences with the revelation strategy fails. I reach this conclusion through two steps. I first discuss whether revelation strategy can solve either problem of transformative experiences, as it is configured with respect to Paul's guidelines. Then, I turn to the debates

that *Transformative Experience* generated to further discuss how a revelation strategy could be configured to solve either of the problems of transformative experiences.

Regarding the first step, I examine the adequacy of the revelation strategy as configured by Paul to solve the information problem. For the revelation strategy, Paul identifies two sources of information: the intrinsic value of what new experiences might teach and the individual's own taste for epistemic transformation. Although a decision based on the evaluation of these two can help an individual to rationally prefer epistemic transformation, I argue that the revelation strategy as presented here fails to account for case-specific factors of each new experience and similarly is very limited in its ability to incorporate first-personal deliberation. Indeed, such a narrow decision-making strategy then bears two additional problems.

Firstly, there is no rational approach to represent negative outcomes based on these two sources of value, negating the use of the revelation in modeling the choice to abstain from particular new experiences. Especially if an individual has a taste for new experiences, he/she must evaluate case-specific factors—which are overlooked in the framework of revelation—to be able to rationally choose to abstain from a new experience. Secondly, the presupposition that electing to not undergo new experiences is dependent on one's taste for new experiences limits the role of case-specific assessments by assuming that this taste does not change with regard to one's evaluation of different transformative experiences. If the implication of the revelation strategy is in fact that undergoing new experiences is the rational choice if one has a taste for new experiences, then the role of first-personal deliberation in decision-making is cut down, which contradicts with Paul's general project.

The problems of the revelation strategy are exacerbated when a new experience causes change in the decision-maker's own self and preferences. Paul suggests that in order to address the preference-change problem, the revelation strategy should require preferring the preference-change. However, in the preference-change problem, in addition to experiencing something one may or may not like, undergoing a new experience entails trade-offs. Personal transformation requires individuals to forsake certain aspects of their life, as they are likely to have different preference orders and priorities following the transformation. Here, as the value of revelation must be weighed against what the individual might lose, we encounter the 'comparing apples to oranges' problem. It is unclear how one can rationally compare his/her curiosity for new experiences (even if we agree that it is a positive value) with the satisfaction he/she receives from his/her current preference-order and lifestyle.

Aware of the deeper issues with the preference-change problem, Paul makes an additional suggestion for the revelation strategy. She proposes that if individuals develop a higher-order preference to change their current-order preferences, they can then rationally prefer to undergo the change. I argue that a higher-order preference to change one's current preferences can reveal that the individual is not content with his/her current way of life, but it goes no further. Such preference-orders does not imply how an individual can value the discovery of one specific transformative experience more than continuing his/her current life or more than another transformative experience, as changing one's higher-order preferences does provide a decision-theoretic guide to assess which direction one finds valuable to pursue. We again need to incorporate case-specific evaluations in the decision model to be able to represent elaborations concerning alternative futures.

In the section wherein I discuss the revelation strategy with regard to Paul's description, I argue that its configuration of decisions does not solve the problems of transformative experiences and in fact generates new problems. The sources of information it suggests to assign the value of new experiences (even if those are only epistemically transformative experiences) are insufficient to negate the need to use case-specific information, especially if we want to be able to represent the decision to abstain. This evaluation of revelation also narrows the role of first-personal deliberation and therefore contradicts the role Paul assigns to subjective decision-making. Hence, the revelation strategy as presented here does not provide a decision-theoretical method capable of assessing the values of transformative experiences rationally, even in cases that are only epistemically transformative. In terms of the preference-change problem, greater focus is called for regarding the case-specific factors of different transformative experiences, so that individuals can deliberate whether they would prefer the outcomes of a given transformative experience over their current state and lifestyle, as well as over other transformative experiences. The revelation strategy is lacking in this respect too.

Although I had identified the inadequacies of the revelation strategy in solving the problems of transformative experiences, I continued my analysis before concluding that revelatory value cannot be used to make rational decisions. I reviewed the responses to *Transformative Experience* to reconfigure this strategy with respect to the arguments and suggested solutions of the commentators in order to discuss the applicability of a new configuration. Accordingly, I divided them into three groups. Among the group most applicable to the current study, I selected three main authors. With two of them, I engaged with the information problem. I attempted to reconfigure the revelation strategy and

describe the scale on which it can be applied with respect to their arguments, as well as examining whether this reconfiguration could solve the information and the preference-change problems. With the final author, I shifted my attention fully to the preference-change problem.

From the two authors that I studied to discuss the information problem, with regard to Harman's points, I put forth that there can be different types of transformative experiences. The information problem of certain transformative experiences can be solved with an approach different than that applied to the case of becoming a parent. Also, the lack of role of external evidence and testimony to generate useful/valuable information for individuals troubles the author. From the paper by DHS, I discerned a similar stance. DHS argue that what counts as admissible evidence for Paul is restricted to 'what it is like' values; however, the phenomenological character of new experiences is not always the main factor on which people base their decisions.

There are two inferences I make regarding Harman and DHS' papers. Firstly, there can be different ways to undergo transformation and to consider undergoing transformation, some of which can be less relevant to what individuals might grasp of the subjective nature of new experiences. In that regard, as the revelation strategy is also a solution that does not aim at the subjective nature of new experiences, we can be optimistic that it may prove useful in solving some cases. Secondly, as both authors, as well as more commentators, are troubled by the minimal role of external information, exactly what individuals can do with external information must be clarified. Paul does not extensively discuss the extent of usefulness of external information, except than addressing that it cannot help to generate subjective values. Given that the problems of transformative experiences are valid, a decision-theoretic configuration should elucidate the role of external information.

Based on these two points, I suggest a simple reconfiguration. Essentially, the value of 'discovery' should be judged with regard to external information that is not necessarily concerning the phenomenological character of experiences. I propose two uses of this reconfiguration: (1) one can list the available transformative experiences and eliminate experiences that cannot generate successful results, and (2) one can evaluate the likelihood of the outcome, discovery of which is assigned a positive value. This solution can help to generate new information about transformative experiences to model in a decision-theoretic framework. If this is information that the decision-maker requires for the specific transformative experience that he/she is contemplating, then our configuration of the

revelation strategy can solve his/her information problem and help in making rational decisions.

Nevertheless, while this solution is more nuanced, it is still ineffective for a broader range of transformative experiences. Given that the information regarding the phenomenological character of new experiences cannot be discerned via this method, we must be cautious of “the gap between impersonal data and the personal perspective”, which is to say that the reconfiguration of the revelation strategy can only be a solution when personal perspective on the nature of a new experience is not necessary (Paul, 2014, p.133).

Continuing, I investigated whether this solution to the information problem could also be applied to the preference-change problem, reaching the conclusion that it cannot. Paul argues that in the preference-change problem, positively valuing one outcome is insufficient grounds to choose to undergo a transformative experience, as one must be able to weigh it against the other outcomes. I argued in the previous chapter that the same problem exists for the revelation strategy as well. Here I argue that one might positively value discovering what it is like to have children, but—no matter how we reconfigure the revelation strategy—he/she should still weigh it against the other outcomes. Thus, privileging the revelatory value when making decisions regarding future outcomes is inadequate for solving the preference-change problem.

For a more extensive discussion on the preference-change problem, I presented an issue that challenges the revelation strategy with respect to the work of the third author. Barnes argues that the choice of satisfying one’s preferences is considered as rational in decision-theoretic frameworks. Therefore, even if this type of preference-satisfaction has no regard for the revelatory values of possible transformative experiences and preference-changes, it is also rational to abstain from transformative experiences without using the revelation strategy. Barnes puts forth that the revelatory value of new experiences may even have a very insignificant role in one’s considerations of his/her preferences.

With regard to Barnes critique, I, again, argue that even if one agrees that new experiences have revelatory value, pursuing revelation is not sufficient for them to rationally change their current preferences and self, especially if they are content with their current way of life. Barnes’ work points out that locating the revelatory value at the center of a decision-theoretic framework undermines the reflections individuals have regarding the satisfaction they get from their current preferences and the costs that transformation entails for their current lives. The extent to which individuals value their current way of living is central when deliberating their alternatives. A decision strategy that solely focuses on the

evaluation of the value of new discoveries cannot fully grasp the trade-off aspect, so it cannot solve the preference-change problem. Since a preference-satisfaction analysis is needed in order to address the preference-change problem, the revelation strategy is insufficient to guide individuals in their transformative decisions.

Though my analysis of the revelation strategy ends here, I propose a direction for future research. Regarding the trade-off aspect, a more thorough analysis of wellbeing and an evaluation of one's expected returns from satisfying one's own preferences—based in part on Briggs' assessment of the use of interpersonal comparisons of wellbeing—might provide valuable contributions to the existing literature on transformative experiences.

Bibliography

- Allen, P. (2017). Transformative experiences in political life. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 25(4), 59.
- Barnes, E. (2015). What You Can Expect When You Don't Want to be Expecting. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 91(3): 775-786.
- Briggs, R. (2015). Transformative Experience and Interpersonal Utility Comparisons. *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 189-216.
- Bykvist, K., & Stefánsson, H. (2017). Epistemic Transformation And Rational Choice. *Economics and Philosophy*, 33(1): 125-138.
- Campbell, J. (2015). L. A. Paul's Transformative Experience. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 91(3).
- Carel, H, Kidd, IJ & Pettigrew, R. (2016). Illness as transformative experience. *Lancet (London, England)*, 388(10050): 1152-1153.
- Carr, J. (2015). Epistemic Expansions. *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 217-236.
- Chang, R. (2015). Transformative Choices. *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 237-282.
- Dougherty, T, Horwitz, S & Sliwa, P. (2015). Expecting the Unexpected. *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 301-321.
- Friedman, J. Epistemically Transformative Experience. PhilArchive copy v1:
<https://philarchive.org/archive/FRIETEv1>
- Fraser, R. (2018). Stakes sensitivity and transformative experience. *Analysis*, 78(1), 34-39.
- Harman, E. (2009). 'I'll Be Glad I Did It' Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23: 177-199.
- Harman, E. (2015). Transformative Experience and Reliance on Moral Testimony *Res Philosophica* 92 (2): 323-339.
- Jackson, F. (1982). Epiphenomenal qualia. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32: 127-36.
- Jackson, F. (1986). What Mary didn't know. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 83(5), 291-295.
- Kauppinen, A. (2015). What's So Great about Experience? *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 371-388.
- McKinnon, R. (2015). Transformative Experiences. *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 419-440.

- Paul, L. A. (2014). *Transformative Experience*. Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
- Paul, L. A. (2015a) *Transformative Experience: Replies to Pettigrew, Barnes, and Campbell*. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91 (3).
- Paul, L. A. (2015b). What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting. *Res Philosophica*, 92 (2): 149-170.
- Paul, L. A. (2015c). Transformative Choice: Discussions and Replies. *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 473-545.
- Pettigrew, R. (2015). Transformative Experience and Decision Theory. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 91(3): 766-774.
- Sacks, O. (1991). *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf*. London: Picador.
- Sharadin, N. (2015). How You Can Reasonably Form Expectations When You're Expecting. *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 441-452.
- Shupe, E. (2016). Transformative experience and the limits of revelation. *Philosophical Studies : An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 173(11), 3119-3132.
- Velji, M. (2015). Change Your Look, Change Your Luck: Religious Self-Transformation and Brute Luck Egalitarianism. *Res Philosophica*, 92(2): 453-471.
- Zelcer, M. (2015). Conscientious objection and the transformative nature of war. *Journal of Military Ethics*, 14(2): 118-122.