

# What You Can Expect When You Don't Want to be Expecting

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*Transformative Experience* is a rich, insightful, compelling book. LA Paul persuasively argues that our standard way of thinking about major life choices (and some minor ones too) is inadequate, because it fails to take into account the subjective phenomenal values of lived experiences. When deciding whether to do something, we need to assess how good the outcome will be for us. But Paul argues that in many such cases, we simply don't have enough information to do this. And that's because we don't have information about the subjective phenomenal value of the experience we're considering - that is, we don't know *what it's like* (for us) to have that experience. This means our decision is inherently under-informed. We can't decide how to assign values to possible outcomes (undergoing the experience or failing to undergo the experience) because we don't have a complete picture of what those values really are.

I find much of what Paul argues in the book completely persuasive. What I want to argue here is that some of her points are not as widely generalizable as she takes them to be. Specifically, I'm going to argue that there are plenty of cases in which we don't know what an experience is like, but we nevertheless can rationally choose to avoid that experience based on projected outcomes. And that's because we can rationally choose based on the belief that *whatever* that experience is like, we're fairly sure it's something we don't want.

## 1. SOME BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I have never wanted kids. Neither has my partner. And it isn't that we don't want kids in a 'well, despite the appeal of having kids, all things considered it is probably best for our careers and our overall wellbeing that we stay child-free' kind of way. We don't want kids in the sense that we've never had the slightest desire to have them, and other peoples' strong desire to have them is somewhat mystifying to us.

It's not that we don't like kids. We're fond of our friends' kids and love our nieces very much. But spending time with kids has always felt a bit like going to the circus: entertaining - in a loud, boisterous sort of way - but not something we'd seriously consider joining ourselves.

Given my and my partner's preferences, deciding not to have kids seemed pretty rational. Indeed, it seemed like one of the most rational, clearest choices we've ever made. So it would be a surprising result, to say the least, if it turned out not to have been rational at all.

## 2. CHOOSING WHETHER TO HAVE CHILDREN

If Paul is right, however, our choice not to have children *wasn't* rational. Because we don't know what it's like to have kids, we can't rationally choose to abstain from doing so. Or, more carefully, we can't rationally choose to abstain from doing so in the standard way, which is by thinking about our potential kid-having future, thinking about our potential not-kid-having-future, and then deciding which we prefer. We can't make such a choice rationally, Paul argues, because the experience of having a child is *transformative*.

Paul distinguishes between two types of transformative experiences. *Epistemically* transformative experiences give you access to new sorts of phenomenological information that was previously unavailable to you. *Personally* transformative experiences are those that fundamentally alter your beliefs, preferences, or sense of self. Epistemically transformative experiences needn't also be personally transformative. Trying Vegemite for the first time is epistemically transformative - there is just no way to know *what it's like* to taste Vegemite until you taste it - but for most people trying Vegemite for the first time isn't something that profoundly shapes who they are as a person. But many of our major life experiences, Paul argues, are both personally and epistemically transformative.

Having a child is one such experience, according to Paul. It's epistemically transformative because you can't know what it's like to have a child until you have one. And it's personally transformative because having a child reshapes your preferences, your desires, and even your own sense of who you are in radical ways.<sup>1</sup> And because of this, Paul argues, we can't rationally choose whether to have a child (or at least can't do so by projecting child-having and non-child-having outcomes and comparing them).

Paul bases her argument on what she labels the subjective values of experiences. According to Paul, subjective values are:

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<sup>1</sup> According to Paul, '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)

[V]values of experiences. . .that do not reduce to anything else: they are primitive and they are not merely values of pleasure and pain. Instead, the values are widely variable, intrinsic, complex, and grounded by cognitive phenomenology. So such values, as I shall understand them, are values that can be grounded by more than merely qualitative or sensory characters, as they may also arise from nonsensory phenomenological features of experiences, especially rich, developed experiences that embed a range of mental states, including beliefs, emotions, and desires (p. 12).

These subjective values are an important part of how good (or bad) an experience is for us. And this is what creates the problem for the standard model of rational decision-making in the case of transformative experience. In deciding whether or not to undergo an experience, we need to assign values to the relevant outcomes - and so we need to have a reasonably informed sense of how good or bad an outcome will be for us. But a crucial aspect of how good or bad an outcome will be for us is its subjective value. Yet, Paul argues, in the case of transformative experiences, this is something we cannot know (or even predict with accuracy):

Subjective values, grounded by what it is like to have lived experiences, are first-personal values. . . Given this, you must have had the right kind of experience to know a subjective value, because you must know what an experience of that type is like to know its [subjective] value — for example, you must experience color before you can know the subjective value of what it's like to see color (p.13-14).

Deciding whether to have a child is, in part, deciding whether to undergo a transformative experience. According to Paul:

When you face a transformative choice, that is, a choice of whether to undergo an epistemically and personally transformative experience, you face a certain kind of ignorance: ignorance about what it will be like to undergo the experience and ignorance about how the experience will change you. Thus, you face a certain kind of ignorance about what your future will be like. (p. 31-2)

And this ignorance - ignorance of the very the things we care about the most - renders a fully rational decision impossible. You can't make a rational choice simply because you're dramatically - and inherently - under-informed.

So much for deciding to have a child. Why should ignorance of the subjective value of having a child prevent us from rationally deciding *not* to have a child? If we've been child-free up to now, we know what it's like to be child-free. And while we don't know exactly what it will be like to continue to be child-free - simply insofar as no one can really know what the future will be like - we can at least make an educated guess.

The problem, Paul argues, arises from the transformative nature of having a child, particularly the personal transformativeness. Because having a child both gives you new information and (in some cases radically) alters your preferences and your sense of self in a fundamental way, those who remain child-free don't know what they're missing. As a result, in choosing to remain child-free they can't adequately compare a child-free future with a child-having future. Paul writes:

When we face a choice like this, we can't know what our lives will be like until we've undergone the new experience, but if we don't undergo the experience, we won't know what we are missing. And, further, many of these new and unknown experiences are life-changing or dramatically personally transformative. So not only must you make the choice without knowing what it will be like if you choose to have the new experience, but the choice is big, and you know it is big. You know that undergoing the experience will change what it is like for you to live your life, and perhaps even change what it is like to *be* you, deeply and fundamentally (p. 3).

To rationally choose whether to have a child, according to Paul, you need to be able to compare the child-having future with the non-child-having future - which is exactly what you can't do if you don't know the subjective values of the child-having future. And so, Paul argues:

you cannot rationally choose to have the experience, nor can you rationally choose to avoid it, to the extent that your choice is based on your assessments of what the experience would be like and what this would imply about your future lived experience (p. 18-19).

Importantly, Paul doesn't take the upshot of this to be that rational choices about having children (or other transformative experiences) are impossible. She just thinks you can't make rational choices *based on comparing projected subjective outcomes* - which is, of course, what we often take ourselves to be doing in this situation, and what standard models of decision theory represent us as doing. We could rationally choose whether to

have a child for objective reasons that have nothing to do with the subjective values of the experience. We could choose to have a child if we needed an heir, for example, or we could choose not to have a child if we knew we couldn't afford it.

But Paul also argues that we can make rational choices in cases of transformative experience simply by choosing whether we want a new experience (whether we want 'revelation'). In the child-having case, we don't choose whether to have a child based on the projected values of having a child compared to not having one. Instead, we choose based on whether we want a new experience - whether we want our lives to stay roughly the same or whether we want to find out who we'd become as parents:

In general, then, the proposed solution is that, if you are to meet the normative rational standard in cases of transformative choice, you must choose to have or to avoid transformative experiences based largely on revelation: you decide whether you want to discover how your life will unfold given the new type of experience. If you choose to undergo a transformative experience and its outcomes, you choose the experience for the sake of discovery itself (p. 120).

But this is, Paul readily admits, not the decision procedure most of us follow, nor the type of choice most of us take ourselves to be making. Her proposed solution is, in this sense, radically revisionary. And if she is right, it means that choices like my and my partner's - the choices of the resolutely child-free to remain so, based on the simple thought that we just don't want kids - aren't rational, at least if they're made (as they so often are) on the basis of projected subjective values for outcomes. But, as I'm going to argue, I don't think Paul is right about this.

### **3. SWIMMING WITH SHARKS**

Notably, Paul doesn't think that *all* projected-value decisions involving transformative experiences are irrational. We probably don't know what it's like to get eaten by a shark, she grants, but we can still rationally try to avoid it. And, more importantly, we can rationally choose to avoid it for reasons stronger than wanting to avoid revelation.

The case of getting eaten by a shark no doubt introduces some complications, though. Ostensibly, getting eaten by a shark is lethal. It might, in general, be rational to preserve your life even if you don't know what it's like to die, and Paul's view can accommodate this (since Paul can plausibly grant that you needn't know the subjective values of continuing to exist to prefer that outcome to its alternative). So let's consider, rather than

getting eaten by a shark, getting your leg chewed off at the knee by a shark. That's not lethal (let's assume you have access to medical care that will stop the bleeding) but it's something most of us want to avoid, even if we don't know what it's like.

Paul thinks - I'm assuming, based on the discussion of the shark case - that you can rationally choose to avoid getting your leg chewed off by a shark, even if you don't know what it's like to get your leg chewed off by a shark. And that's because you've got a decent amount of evidence which suggests that what it's like to get your leg chewed off by a shark is a what it's like to be avoided. You are pretty sure that it would be painful, for one thing, even if you don't know in exactly what way, and so insofar as you don't like painful things you have good reason to suppose that you won't like this particular painful thing. Moreover, there aren't lots of surfers proclaiming the transformative magic of shark attacks. Nor do your friends and family try to persuade you that, strange as it may seem to you now, you will really will enjoy getting attacked by a shark once you try it.

And so, Paul argues, in the case of getting attacked by a shark, you can engage in a kind of projective forecasting, even though you don't know what it's like to be attacked by a shark. And that's because you have good reason to suppose that *whatever* it's like to be attacked by a shark is something you want to avoid. That is, you have good reason to think you will prefer not getting attacked by a shark to being attacked by a shark, even though you don't have access to the phenomenal value of getting attacked by a shark. And so it's rational, Paul argues, to avoid swimming in shark-infested waters, even if you don't have full information about the phenomenological values this could lead to.

Paul maintains, however, that this concession is a minor one. Indeed, she states that:

I am assuming, here and throughout, that cases like the shark-eating case are outside of the scope of this discussion. (p. 32, note 39)

But in what follows, I argue that many choices involving potentially transformative experiences have more in common with the shark case than Paul admits.

#### **4. THOUGHT POLICE AND ASSIMILATION**

When considering whether to get attacked by a shark, you're considering whether to undergo an experience that you're pretty sure, given your current preferences, you'd rather not undergo. It's also the case that you don't know of anyone who reports back

from getting attacked by a shark and says it was amazing. Other experiences, however, meet the first condition without meeting the latter condition. That is, some people *do* report back and say those experiences are amazing, but you're still pretty sure your current preferences make it such that you'd rather not undergo them. What I want to argue is that we can rationally choose to avoid this type of experience.<sup>2</sup>

In *1984*, Winston famously attempts to avoid being captured by the Thought Police. In this scenario, Winston is deciding whether to undergo a transformative experience. If he is captured by the Thought Police, it will be personally transformative: it will reshape his desires and his self-conception. He also has plenty of evidence that those who are captured and re-educated end up being very happy that they've undergone the process. And yet pre-Room 101 Winston strongly prefers not to be captured by the Thought Police, despite not knowing what it would be like to be re-educated, and despite the reported testimony of many that being re-educated is wonderful and fulfilling.

Pre-Room 101 Winston has many preferences, and among these are strong preferences not to live the kind of life that a person who is re-educated by the Thought Police will live. He wants to find out the truth. He wants to continue his relationship with Julia. He doesn't want to be slavishly devoted to Big Brother. He doesn't know what it's like to be re-educated by the Thought Police, but he knows that, whatever it's like, it's something he'd prefer to avoid.

Winston also has very good reason, of course, to suppose that all these preferences would change should he be captured by the Thought Police and re-educated. But, crucially, the fact that he knows his preferences would change doesn't affect how strongly he wishes to avoid being captured. If anything, it strengthens his desire to avoid capture. These preferences are part of who he is, and they matter to him. He quite simply doesn't want to be the kind of person who doesn't care about the things he currently cares about. Such a person - and such preferences - are *alien* to him. That is, they seem utterly foreign and bizarre (and unwanted) to his current self-conception and his current preference. Nor is this sense of alienation lessened by the his knowledge that, were he to become such a person, he would likely not regret it. (Indeed, once he is captured and re-educated he ends

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<sup>2</sup> For an interestingly different way of arguing for a very similar conclusion, see Sharadin, Nate (forthcoming) 'How You can Reasonably Form Expectations When You're Expecting'. *Res Philosophica*. Sharadin argues for the presence of 'linking principles' between current preferences and likely expected outcomes, claiming that in many cases you can know whether an experience is (likely to) have positive or negative valence for you even if you can't know exactly what that experience will be like (including *how* positive or *how* negative it will be.)

content in the love of Big Brother and doesn't want to go back to his previous state. But that's something that makes his story tragic, not something that makes his previous desires to avoid capture irrational.)

Similarly, in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* Captain Picard wants to avoid being assimilated by the Borg.<sup>3</sup> Being assimilated by the Borg is a transformative experience. You discover what it's like to be a member of a hivemind. Your desires and sense of self are completely altered by the will of the Borg collective. And so on. Moreover, there's good reason to suppose that this is a transformative experience that alters preferences. Borg don't regret becoming Borg. They think everyone should become Borg. They think being Borg is the best way to be.

And yet, despite not knowing what it's like to be Borg, it seems fair to say that Picard has reason to suppose that whatever it's like to be Borg is something they want to avoid. He values autonomy and freewill. He values individuality and independence of thought. He values non-violence and the Prime Directive.<sup>4</sup> And he knows that becoming Borg would contravene all these values. Becoming Borg would also, of course, change his preferences such that he no longer values these things. But given what he values now, he doesn't want to become Borg, despite knowing that his preferences would change should he become Borg. Again, becoming Borg would change his preferences in a way that is *alien* (pun definitely intended) to him. Given who he is now - what we want, what he desires, what he values - the preferences of post-assimilation Picard are utterly foreign to pre-assimilation Picard's sense of self.

Being captured by the Thought Police or assimilated by the Borg are unlike being attacked by a shark for the simple reason that the former involve predictable preference change in a way the latter does not. There are lots of people who value having been captured by the Thought Police or assimilated by the Borg, and assure you that you will too once it happens to you. The same isn't true for shark attacks.

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<sup>3</sup> I'm going to assume here, for simplicity, that there's still something that it's like to be you, as an individual consciousness, after you've been assimilated by the Borg. That's not clear from the fiction. I'm also considering Picard's choice before he is captured by the Borg. After being captured, he at least seems to have some sense of what it's like to be Borg.

<sup>4</sup> It's not actually clear whether Picard does value the Prime Directive, rather than some specific applications of it, given how often he breaks it. Thanks to Prof. Heather Logue for discussion on this crucial point.

But based on Winston's *current preferences*, getting captured by the Thought Police is like getting attacked by a shark. And based on Picard's *current preferences*, getting assimilated by the Borg is like getting attacked by a shark. Neither Winston nor Picard know what these things are like, but they have good reason to suppose that - whatever they're like - they're something they really don't want, given their values, hopes, dreams, and desires.

## 5. RATIONALLY PREFERRING TO REMAIN AS YOU ARE

Paul, of course, can say that Winston's choice to avoid the Thought Police and Picard's choice to run from the Borg *are* rational. But - assuming both choices are based on subjective beliefs and desires - they can only be rational insofar as they are choices to avoid 'revelation'. Winston's choice is rational to the extent that he is choosing not to undergo a new experience. And, likewise, Picard's choice is rational insofar as he is choosing to avoid finding out new phenomenological information (choosing to avoid finding out what it would be like to be Borg).

But this solution seems to (somewhat woefully) misdescribe the cases. Winston doesn't try to avoid being captured by the Thought Police because he doesn't want a new experience. He tries to avoid being captured by the Thought Police because *he doesn't want to be captured by the Thought Police*. And he doesn't want that experience because of what it entails - because he knows that being captured by the Thought Police will mean an end to his quest to find out what's really going on, an end to his resistance to Big Brother, and an end to his love for Julia. Winston doesn't need direct phenomenological awareness of what it's like to be re-educated by the Thought Police to know that - whatever it's like - it isn't what he wants.

Moreover, Paul's proposed solution seems to make transformative choice too coarse-grained. When we are faced with a transformative choice, the thought goes, we must choose to have a new experience or to forgo it, with the idea that the new experience itself is something of a phenomenological black box. And that's because its character - its *what it's likeness* - is hidden. But how, then, are we to explain choices between different sorts of transformations? Captain Picard does not want to be assimilated by the Borg: he does not want *that particular* new experience. But he is not at all averse to new and unknown experiences in general. Indeed, he seems to purposefully seek them out ('to boldly go where no one has gone before'). More often than not, Picard will choose

revelation - he will choose to find out what a new experience is like, simply for the thrill of discovery. But he wants to avoid being assimilated by the Borg.

Paul grants that in some special cases - like getting attacked by a shark - your lack of *what it's like* knowledge doesn't impede your ability to make rational decisions based on projected outcomes. Yes, you're ignorant of (some of) the relevant subjective values. But you have enough other knowledge (your fear of sharks, your dislike of pain, your fondness for your leg, etc) to make it the case that such ignorance doesn't interfere with your decision-making. What I'm claiming is that such cases aren't as rare as Paul seems to think.

In Paul's view, a predictable preference change seems to be enough to prevent standard rational decision-making:

If you are to choose rationally, the preferences you have right now seem to have priority, such that to choose rationally you must choose in accordance with the preferences you have now. But your pre-experience preferences are dramatically incomplete, due to the epistemic inaccessibility of the values of the radically new outcomes. Under such circumstances, why should you be biased towards the preferences of your present self, the epistemically impoverished self? (p. 49)

But this seems too strong. Cases like Winston's and Picard's are those in which, *given their current preferences*, a particular transformative experience is something they clearly don't want, even if they don't know what it would be like. True, if they underwent the transformative experience their preference would change. But, crucially, the way in which their preferences would change is itself a violation of their current preferences and values.

## 6. CHARACTER PLANNING IS RATIONAL

What both Winston and Picard are engaged in is a type of *character-planning*. Despite not knowing what it would be like to be captured by the Thought Police or assimilated by the Borg, they know that these events would violate their preferences, their values, and even their sense of self. They also know, of course, that their preferences, their values, and even their sense of self would change if they underwent these experiences. But they would change in ways that are themselves violations of their preferences, their values, and their sense of self. That is, their preferences would change in a way that is alien to their current sense of self. Winston does not want to become the kind of person who is

sycophantically devoted to Big Brother - developing those kinds of preferences is abhorrent to him as he is now. Picard does not want to become the kind of person who values the conquest and assimilation of other races - developing those kinds of preferences is abhorrent to him as he is now. Winston's choice to avoid the Thought Police and Picard's choice to avoid the Borg are both, I contend, completely rational when seen in this light. They are choosing to preserve their character, to continue to value what they value and pursue the projects they want to pursue.

But what of more mundane, ordinary cases like choosing *not* to have children? When my partner and I chose not to have children, it was for the simple reason that we didn't want them (and couldn't really imagine wanting them). Having children was a clear violation of our preferences and desires, even though we could predict that if we had a child our preferences would change. Paul argues that:

the prospective parent who places a high value on remaining child-free faces an even worse dilemma, because, while friends and relatives tend to testify to their satisfaction after becoming parents, the empirical work suggests that well-being plummets. In this case, the evidence from testimony of friends and relatives suggests that the reluctant prospective parent should prioritize the preferences she'd have after becoming a parent, whereas the scientific evidence suggests she should prioritize the preferences she has before becoming a parent. The problem, then, is that there is no clearly correct decision-theoretic rule about which set of preferences to prefer at this level: those of the current, decision-making, child-free self or those of the future self who has become a parent. (p. 117)

But here I suggest that Paul - somewhat ironically, given how much emphasis she places of the first-person perspective in decision making - is demanding an overly objective stance from the would-be parent. On Paul's model, it seems as though we should be able to step back to a neutral, preference-free perspective and evaluate whose preferences should matter more: those of the current, child-free person or those of the future parent. But why should this kind of neutral evaluation be required for rational decision-making?

Winston doesn't need to weigh the potential preferences of post-Room 101 Winston when deciding to avoid the Thought Police. Picard doesn't need to weigh the preferences of post-assimilation Picard in deciding to avoid the Borg. In both cases, those preferences are alien to who they are now - that is, to the people currently making the choices. If such

preference matter at all in Winston and Picard's choices, they matter only insofar as both Winston and Picard value never becoming the people who have such preferences.

Similarly, I don't think that I need to weigh the preferences of post-baby Elizabeth in deciding to take birth control. Winston and Picard do not want their preferences to change in ways which are completely alien to them, and which violate their current sense of self. Likewise for me, though admittedly to a milder degree. Having always actively desired not to have children, the preferences of post-baby me are completely alien - they violate both my current preferences and my sense of self. I can't imagine having such preferences, and having such preferences would be in tension with things about myself that I currently place great value on. It's rational for me to avoid such an experience, and such a change in preferences, even if I don't know what it's like to have the experience, or to have my preferences change in such a way. Whatever having kids is like, it's something that I can rationally predict that I don't want *given who I am now*.

When I choose not to have children, it isn't simply a choice to avoid 'revelation' or a choice made 'for the sake [or lack of] discovery itself'. It is, quite simply, a choice not to have children because I know I don't want them. And so it's a choice based on projected outcomes. I can project, given my current desires and presences, that having kids is a less good outcome than not having them, even though I'm ignorant of some of the relevant subjective values. In making such a choice - in assigning values to the relevant outcomes in this way - I'm engaged in a type of character planning. I'm choosing to value the person I am now, and I'm not placing weight on potential preferences that are alien - incomprehensible, foreign, in tension with my current preferences and values - to who I am now. I'm making a choice based on projected outcomes - a choice that values a non-kid-having future over a kid-having future - and evaluating those outcomes based on my actual, current preferences. That ought to be rational, I submit, even if my preferences could change. In a choice like this, I'm saying whatever it's like to have kids (which I grant I don't know), I can reasonably assume it's something I don't want, given who I am now and given that who I am now is part of what I value.

And so, in a nutshell, what I'm arguing is this. For many of the happily child-free, having kids is kind of like getting assimilated by the Borg. We don't know what it's like. But we can still rationally choose to avoid it.

