

Transformative Experience and the Right to Revelatory Autonomy

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Forthcoming in *Analysis*

Abstract

Sometimes it is not us but those to whom we stand in special relations that face transformative choices: our friends, family, or beloved. A focus upon first-personal rational choice and agency has left crucial ethical questions regarding what we owe to those who face transformative choices largely unexplored. In this paper, I ask: under what conditions, if any, is it morally permissible to interfere with to try to prevent another from making a transformative choice? Some seemingly plausible answers to this question fail precisely because they concern transformative experiences. I argue that we have a distinctive moral right to revelatory autonomy grounded in the value of autonomous self-making. If this right is outweighed then, I argue, interfering to prevent another making a transformative choice is permissible. This conditional answer lays the groundwork for a promising ethics of transformative experience.

1. Introduction

Transformative experiences raise difficult and much discussed questions regarding first-personal rational choice and agency. But, I argue, focus upon these issues has left crucial *ethical* questions regarding our behaviour towards *others* who face transformative choices untouched. Here, I ask: under what conditions, if any, is it permissible to interfere with to try to prevent others from choosing to undergo a transformative experience? I argue that we possess a moral right to what I call revelatory autonomy, providing a conditional answer to this question that, unlike other views I shall consider, accommodates the epistemic peculiarities of transformative choices and lays a plausible groundwork for an ethics of transformative experiences.

2. The Question

Call an experience *epistemically* transformative if and only if it provides some knowledge or understanding that one can possess only if one undergoes that experience, like tasting a new fruit or first seeing a colour. And call an experience *personally* transformative just when it changes the core preferences, values, and desires of whoever undergoes them, like starting a career, taking a

university course, or reading moving literature. A *transformative experience* is one that is both epistemically and personally transformative, such as becoming a parent, going to war, or studying at university (Paul 2014: 16–17).¹

Transformative *choices* – choices whether to have transformative experiences – raise difficult questions about first-personal rational choice and agency. For how could one make an *informed* choice whether to go to university if one can only know what it is like if one goes? Even if one could know what it would be like, given that one will change if they go, *whose preferences matter* in this choice: your present or future preferences? And since the experience will change who you are, why should the outcome of this experience for some *other self* be relevant to what your present self should do now?

But suppose that it is not you who faces the transformative choice but, instead, your *friend, sibling, or your romantic partner(s)*. Such situations raise difficult *ethical* questions regarding our behaviour towards *others* who face transformative choices. Consider,

Love: Jack and Jill are childhood sweethearts. Jack hopes to spend his life in their village. Jill hopes to pursue a university education elsewhere. Jill receives a full scholarship to a university elsewhere. Jack considers trying to stop Jill from taking up the scholarship.

Friendship: Shireen and Siavash are best friends. Siavash has a high-paying city job. Recently, Siavash has considered quitting this job to become a school teacher. Shireen considers trying to stop Siavash from doing so.

¹ These are *voluntary* transformative experiences. As Carel & Kidd 2020 helpfully illustrate, there are also *involuntary* experiences (unintended consequences of an action one is causally responsible for) and *nonvoluntary* experiences (due to actions you are not causally responsible for). I am concerned only with the voluntary. The others raise different ethical questions I hope to pursue elsewhere.

Family: Adam is Charlie's brother. Adam is considering whether to become a parent. Charlie considers trying to stop Adam from doing so.

The transformative experiences literature typically proceeds as if we are only ever in the position of Jill, Siavash, and Adam. But often we are in the position of Jack, Shireen, and Charlie: not *ourselves* facing a transformative choice but in a position to influence *another's* transformative choice. Why might we do so? We may have self-interested reasons to stop others from making certain choices, as Jack does in *Love*. And sometimes without vested interests, as in *Friendship* or *Family*, it may simply be unclear what one may permissibly do when given the opportunity to affect another's transformative choice.

These questions concern crucial moments in our interactions with those we stand in special relations to. They present an urgent ethical challenge that focus upon first-personal transformative decision-making has left unexplored.² To begin addressing them, I ask:

(The Question): Under what conditions, if any, is it morally permissible to interfere with or to try to prevent another from making a transformative choice?

I argue that three *prima facie* plausible answers to (The Question) fail. They seem attractive partly because they seem plausible as views of when we might permissibly interfere in another's choice more generally. But these views fail, I argue, *precisely because* they concern

² These interpersonal ethical questions go beyond what some who have begun tackling the ethical terrain in the decision-theoretic background have identified. For example, Amia Srinivasan (2015), in her excellent review of L.A. Paul's (2014), asks how one ethically ought to decide to make transformative choices; Dana Sarah Howard's excellent (2015) explores an ethical justification for making transformative choices on behalf of others (e.g., our children); Elizabeth Barnes' insightful (2015) brilliantly suggests that whether and how an experience is transformative can be a matter of social justice; and Fiona Woollard's exceptional (2021) explores pregnancy as an ethically important epistemically transformative experience.

transformative choices and experiences. I argue instead for an answer that recognises a distinctive moral right, and corresponding duty, concerning transformative choices, laying the groundwork for an ethics of transformative experiences.

There are numerous forms of interference in another's decision-making. For example, Charlie might coerce, manipulate, rationally persuade, or force Adam not to become a parent. In what follows, 'interference' refers to any of these. What is required to permit such interventions may, of course, differ. But I will argue that the distinctive moral right we possess concerning transformative choices places a necessary condition on all such interference, and provides the best framework from which to make tractable other questions regarding the interpersonal ethics of transformative experiences.

3. The Right to Revelatory Autonomy

Transformative experiences differ in *valence*: they can be positively or negatively transformative (Carel & Kidd 2020: 207–209). Positive epistemically transformative experiences increase our knowledge or understanding and negative ones decrease them; positive personally transformative experiences change who we are for the better, morally or prudentially, and negative ones change us for the worse.

Perhaps, then, we may permissibly interfere with another's transformative choice just when that experience will be a negative epistemically or personally transformative experience. For example, if Adam's becoming a parent were to make him worse off epistemically or personally, then Charlie may permissibly try to dissuade Adam from doing so.

The problem, however, is that this view ignores that there are paradigmatic cases of transformative experiences where we *do not know* nor have *good reason to believe* that they will be

positive or negative until *after* they have happened.³ Becoming a parent, for example, is a positive personally transformative experience for some and not others (like those who learn they are emotionally incapable of good parenting). This epistemic barrier, characteristic of some paradigmatic transformative experiences, makes it implausible to think that permissible interference generally depends upon knowledge, or reasons for belief, one *cannot possess* before that choice is made.

Of course, a third-party can be in a slightly different epistemic position than a transformative chooser. If Charlie has experienced holding his baby child, then he may be in a better position to know what holding one's baby in general is like than Adam. But there is no reason to think that what it is like *for Charlie* to hold *his* child is the same as what it would be like *for Adam* to hold *his* child. That is, whilst holding your baby child is a type of experience that is generally personally transformative and generates new phenomenological information, it is not always transformative *in the same way* or creates *the same new information*.

For, as Elizabeth Barnes (2015: 175) puts it, 'all the different experiences that will have led up to [the experience(s)], and all the differences in the two people who are the subjects of the experience' make this unlikely. Given Charlie's history and constitution prior to holding his child, his doing so may invoke joy and deep unconditional love. Adam, alternatively, may, given his history and constitution, come to feel deep fear, regret, and resentment when doing so. Parenthood can thus also be generally transformative without being so *in the same way* for everyone. Given the variation in the experiences that lead up to transformative experiences, and the differences in subjects, the point generalises: we cannot know the value of such experiences for individuals in many paradigmatic cases.

³ This view is also troubled by *ambivalent* transformative experiences, where it is unclear that the experience was relevantly positive or negative (see Carel & Kidd 2020: 205-207).

Should we thus conclude that we may *never* permissibly interfere in a transformative choice, because we cannot have knowledge of what it would be like for someone at the time of their decision-making? This is too quick. For suppose someone wished to have the transformative experience of going on a killing spree, or to cut off their body from their waist down. Regardless of not knowing what this will be like for them, we clearly *are* permitted to prevent them from making *these* choices. So ‘there are no conditions’ is not a plausible answer to (The Question).

A second view, then: it is permissible to interfere with another’s transformative choice just when it is in the *best interests* of that person for you to do so. For example, suppose Shireen knows that Siavash has expensive tastes that will likely not be met if he became a teacher, and that Siavash would have fewer opportunities to see his current workmates if he changed jobs. These seem like good grounds upon which to object to Siavash’s transformative choice.

Or a third view: the permissibility of interference in a transformative choice is determined by standard decision-theoretic procedures of determining what to do under conditions of uncertainty by calculating *expected utilities*. On this view, we calculate the expected consequences of choosing the transformative experience as opposed to not doing so. Then, once we know which is most likely to maximise the expected utility for the chooser, we either may permissibly intervene just when the choice will not maximise expected utility and not otherwise.

The problems with both views are these. First, we can only know *what* the interests of the future selves are and *whether* one’s present interests will be fulfilled *after* a transformative choice has been made. Siavash, for example, might manage to retain his current friendships and afford his expensive tastes, and we do not know if future Siavash would wish this. Similarly, since the

utilities associated with a transformative experience, such as Jill's going to university, partly depend upon what it would be like for her, and since she can only know this *after* going, how could we know *what* the expected utility of her going to university is?

Second, even if we knew what the future person's interests are and whether their present interests would be fulfilled, *whose* interests would morally matter for the permissibility of intervening in a transformative choice: those, say, of present Siavash or future Siavash? Such interests may differ, and it seems arbitrary to privilege one over the other. Similarly, even if we knew the expected utilities of, say, Jill's going to university, *which* utilities morally matter for whether Jack may permissibly intervene: those of present Jill or future Jill?⁴

These problems are serious. By making the permissibility of interference dependent upon knowledge or reasons for belief we cannot possess at the time of choosing, both views, first, entail that we can never know or have good reason to believe that we can permissibly interfere in a transformative choice. But this, as we've seen, is implausible. Second, given that there is a minimal condition on acting permissibly that one has good reason to believe the conditions that make your action permissible are met, they also entail that we can *never* permissibly intervene in a transformative choice. Since we can, these views are false.⁵

Answering (The Question), I suggest, requires recognising that the above views face their objections *precisely because* they concern transformative experiences. Due to the epistemic barrier between the time before and after a transformative choice, views that depend upon the valence

⁴ Of course, which epistemic utilities matter in first-personal rational decision-making receives much attention: see Pettigrew (2019) for excellent discussion. The point here is that even if these issues were resolved, it remains unclear which utilities *morally matter* regarding interference in other's transformative choices.

⁵ If this condition on morally permissible action is rejected and someone accepted one of the two views on the permissibility of interference above, then given the epistemic features of many paradigmatic transformative experiences, they are forced to accept that we can permissibly interfere in transformative choices but we cannot know when we can do so. This, I suggest, is implausible given the would-be killer and self-mutilation cases.

of a transformative experience, best interests of someone, or expected utilities are unable to provide plausible accounts of when we may permissibly interfere in transformative choices.

This provides some adequacy conditions on an answer to (The Question). First, the permissibility of interference should not be taken to depend upon knowing the valence of the relevant experience. Second, it should avoid leaving it an open question to whom some relevant moral obligation is owed between a present or future person. Third, it should not depend upon knowing the unknowable interests of, nor the consequences of the choice on, some future person.

I suggest that it is highly plausible that we have:

(Revelatory Autonomy): The moral right to autonomously decide to discover how one's life will go and who they will become by making a transformative choice.⁶

This is a right to autonomously decide for ourselves whether to discover what our lives will be like and who we will become after making a transformative choice. Importantly this is not *just* a right to autonomy. That right raises similar questions as the views we've already considered, such as whether others should act so as to respect the autonomy of the present person or their future self (which may conflict). Instead, it is a right to make *specific* autonomous choices we are confronted with *at a given time* to have revealed to us, through making a transformative choice, who we will become. Insofar as a future version of oneself has such a right, that right concerns only the transformative choices *they* may face in the future.

⁶ This is, of course, inspired by Paul's (2014) solution to the decision-theoretic questions that transformative choices raise. My suggestion is that revelation has a crucial *moral* role to play in the ethics of transformative choices. For excellent discussion of the revelation approach to the decision-theoretic problems, see Eli Shupe (2016).

But what, one might object, is so morally important about *making a free choice*? Perhaps there is nothing specifically morally valuable about being allowed to make a free choice in general: as Onora O’Neill (2003: 3) puts it, that ‘mere, sheer independence or choosing is morally important’. If so, then why think that there is such moral value to autonomously making transformative choices that we have a moral right to do so?

The answer, I suggest, is the moral value of *autonomous self-making*. It is not the value of making a choice *as such* but, rather, that of autonomously making choices to learn what our core preferences and values will become. For autonomously making transformative choices when facing them, deciding for ourselves to learn who we will become, gives us a degree of *self-authorship*. A degree of control, that is, over not necessarily who we become (since we do not know this given the nature of transformative experiences) but over choosing ourselves to learn who we will become through a choice we make. And some degree of self-authorship in this sense is crucial for us and others to see ourselves as *ourselves* – selves we have become at least partly through transformative choices we have made. It is the value of autonomously self-making that grounds the right to revelatory autonomy.⁷

Such a right generates this correlative duty:

(Revelatory Non-Interference): The moral duty not to interfere in the autonomous self-making of others, through their choosing to undergo transformative experiences to discover who they will become.

⁷ Thus, my account is silent on what moral value there may be to what O’Neill (2003: 3–6) calls ‘rational autonomy’, as I focus solely on the moral value of autonomous self-making and not autonomous choice-making *simpliciter*. For similar remarks on what I call the value of self-making, see Tsai (2014: 89–101) and Wallace (2004: 396).

Together, these suggest that it is permissible to interfere in the transformative choices of others *only if* their right to revelatory autonomy is outweighed. I suggest further that: *if* someone's right to revelatory autonomy is outweighed and our duty of non-interference no longer binds us, *then* it is permissible to interfere with to try to prevent another from making some transformative choice.

This conditional answer meets our adequacy conditions. For the grounds of permissibly interfering need not depend upon the *valence* of the transformative experience. Nor does it leave open to whom the relevant duty is owed. For the right to revelatory autonomy is a right of the *present* person, and does not concern the interests or expected utility of some decision for a future person who does not face this choice. We thus also need not know anything about future interests or consequences to answer (The Question).

Moreover, first, my answer explains *how and why* there are cases where it is morally permissible to interfere in another's transformative choice, despite the epistemic barrier surrounding transformative experiences. Take the would-be killer. I suggest that their right to revelatory autonomy is plausibly outweighed by the wrongness of the killing of others done to discover who one would become by doing so. And with our would-be self-mutilator: the strength of the moral reasons to protect one's friends from gratuitous harm plausibly outweighs their right to autonomously discover what it would be like to, and who they would become by, irreversibly harming themselves solely to discover this. Our corresponding duty of non-interference then is *pro tanto* (Ross 1930; 1939); it can be outweighed by competing moral considerations. By making the permissibility of interference depend upon knowledge we cannot possess prior to the making of a transformative choice, the other views considered cannot explain this.

Second, it seems plausible that some cases of interference in transformative choices are easier to justify than others. For example, what must obtain for it to be permissible to interfere in someone's choice to eat a cheeseburger for the first time seems much less demanding than interference in their choosing to go to university. My view explains this. Since the value of the right to revelatory autonomy is grounded in the value of autonomous self-making, some transformative choices will be more morally valuable than others. Which? Those that are most likely to affect your *core* preferences, identity, and values. As going to university is more likely to affect these than eating a cheeseburger for the first time, the strength of the moral reasons for interference must be much greater for the former than those reasons that would justify interfering in the latter.⁸

One might worry, however, that whilst it seems plausible that coercion, manipulation, and force can in principle violate an agent's right to revelatory autonomy, *rational persuasion* cannot. Rather, rational persuasion *always* respects an agent's right to make autonomous decisions of any kind, since it involves offering reasons, evidence, and arguments, and aims to promote (or at least not undermine) rational decision-making. Since rational persuasion is the form of interference most likely to be pursued in the cases used to motivate this paper, we might worry that this leaves the general framework I've offered troubled.

But distinguish between (a) respecting autonomy *simpliciter* in the sense of respecting someone's ability to be a competent, capable reasoner, and (b) respecting one's *revelatory* autonomy, that is, their right to make a specific decision, at a given time, to learn who they will become through a self-making, transformative choice. Rational persuasion does respect an

⁸ The view also allows that the nature of the interference engaged in, and whether the interference was solicited, can play a part in what makes some cases of interference harder to justify than others.

agent's ability to be a competent, capable reasoner.⁹ But doing the former does not entail respecting an agent's autonomous self-authorship.

For example, one can treat someone in a way that respects their autonomy as a rational agent whilst failing to accord them the epistemic autonomy which they should be granted when facing self-making decisions. That an agent should be given the opportunity to deliberate on transformative choices for themselves is motivated by the value of self-making; the importance of making decisions *for ourselves*. But, for example, one can, as George Tsai (2014) argues, offer a rational argument against a choice at a time or in a way that prevents an agent from exercising such epistemic autonomy: offering it, for example, too early or too forcefully in an agent's deliberative process.

Moreover, recall that we are considering rational persuasion in the context of transformative choices. Another way one can respect an agent's autonomy *simpliciter* whilst violating their right to revelatory autonomy is by trying to offer apparent reasons, arguments, or evidence as if one is in an epistemically privileged position with respect to what some choice would be like for an agent. That would constitute a distinctive disrespect of an agent's autonomous self-making whilst respecting their capacity for autonomous reflection. Even rational persuasion, then, can disrespect an agent's right to revelatory autonomy.

4. Conclusion

Ethical questions regarding transformative experiences are morally urgent. A complete answer to our question requires ascertaining precisely how strong the right to revelatory autonomy is and what competing considerations can outweigh it. These are questions for another time, where the

⁹ If it does not reveal an attitude of inappropriate distrust in another's capacity to reason (Tsai 2014: 91).

moral significance of revelation and self-making, the competing weight of moral and non-moral considerations, and the sense in which some transformative choices are more significant to one's identity and self-making than others must be further explored.

But to identify the right to revelatory autonomy and duty of revelatory non-interference is significant progress. For it provides a framework to address the ethics of transformative experiences that avoids complications arising from the epistemic peculiarities of transformative experiences. It also allows us to explain cases where we are permitted to interfere in another's transformative choice, and why interference in some choices is harder to justify than others, whilst recognising plausible grounds for the right to revelatory autonomy itself in the moral value of autonomous self-making. This framework, moreover, opens novel avenues of engagement with wider ethical issues regarding transformative experience, for example concerning social justice or surrogate transformative choice-making. It is, at the very least, a view worthy of further consideration.¹⁰

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Funding

This work was initially supported by a Graduate Development Scholarship from St Anne's College, Oxford, and an Aristotelian Society Bursary, before being completed at Christ's College, Cambridge. I am immensely grateful to all of these institutions for their support that made this work possible.

¹⁰ I am extremely grateful to Roger Crisp, Geoff Keeling, Timothy Williamson, an audience of the Emerging Research Seminar Series at Christ's College, Cambridge, and three anonymous referees for their insightful feedback that much improved this paper.

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