How to Rationally Approach Life's Transformative Experiences
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Therefore, remove altogether your aversion for anything that is not in our power, and transfer it those things…that *are* in our power.

-- Epictetus, *Enchiridion* Chapter 2, [2]

In a widely discussed forthcoming article, "What you can't expect when you're expecting", as well as in a forthcoming book, L.A. Paul challenges culturally and philosophically traditional views about how to rationally make major life-decisions, most specifically the decision of whether to have children.[1] According to Paul, the culturally and philosophically dominant view of decision-making focuses on outcomes: one rationally ought to make whichever choice has the best expected results. If having a child is likely to make one happy and satisfied, one should have a child; if not, then not. But, Paul argues, this is all a mistake. Some major life-decisions—particularly, the experience having a child of one's own—are *transformative*. They transform a person so deeply, psychologically speaking, that one cannot know in advance what the likely outcomes of different decisions will be. One cannot know, prior to having a child, whether one is more likely to be happy or miserable. Having a child is, essentially, a step into the unknown.

The present paper argues that if the problem Paul presents has no direct solution—if there is no way to defend the philosophically and culturally dominant approach to rational decision-making for major, potentially transformative life-decisions—there is still an indirect solution: a *different* way to rationally approach life's transformative experiences. I focus, in particular, on the well-studied psychological phenomenon of resilience. I argue that if Paul is

[1] See Paul (forthcoming a, b). Paul's argument has already begun to receive discussion in the philosophical and psychological literature. See e.g. Brase (2014) and a forthcoming special issue on transformative experience in *Res Philosophica.*

right, the most rational way to approach potentially transformative choices is to *become resilient people*: people who do not "over-plan" our lives or expect our lives to play out "according to plan", but who instead "accept life as it comes." Moreover, I argue, future empirical research on resilience could resolve whether it is rational to be the kind of person who is disposed to have children, thus resolving in an indirect manner whether it can be rational to have children (more on this shortly). Finally, I argue that this solution to the problem of transformative experience—the development of resilience—stands in direct opposition to culturally dominant attitudes toward decision-making, which focus not on robustness of personal character but on control and mastery over one's surroundings. Thus, I conclude, if Paul's argument about transformative experiences is sound, it follows that we rationally ought to adopt a very different approach to life choices, self-development, and the moral education of our children than currently-dominant cultural norms and practices suggest.

§1 of this paper explains the problem Paul presents in more detail, and augments her argument using results of recent psychological research which indicate that people are systematically poor at estimating how happy or satisfied we will be after making life-choices. Although there may well be other reasons for people to develop psychological resilience as a general adaptive resource, the aim of §1 is to show that is that there is a very *specific* issue regarding rational choice—the problem of transformative experience—which I then show in the rest of the paper rationally mandates the development of resilience (i.e. resilience is an adaptive tool *specifically* for dealing with transformative experience). §2 then shows that if Paul is right that there is no rational way to assign values to particular outcomes at the time a major, potentially transformative life-decision is made, the expected outcomes for *all* available decisions are still higher for people with psychological resilience—that is, for people who understand and are well-disposed to deal with transformative experiences—than they are for

any person who has internalized dominant cultural norms for making major life-decisions. Thus, I conclude, if Paul is right, the most rational way to approach transformative experience is to teach our children to become—and become ourselves—the kind of *resilient people* who understand and are able to deal with these very features of life. §3 then argues that future empirical research on resilience could plausibly show that it is indirectly rational to have a child—rational not as a means to achieving one's goals (as dominant social norms prescribe), but rather as a part of a *resilient life*. Specifically, I contend that future resilience research might show that (A) resilient people tend to desire children, in which case it is rational to become the kind of people who tend to desire children, and/or (B) having a child tends to lead to greater resilience later in life, in which case it may be rational to have a child for the sake of becoming a more resilient person. Although I do not purport to establish either of these hypotheses, I suggest that there are several anecdotal reasons—as well as emerging psychological research on how to develop positive psychological mechanisms for making better decisions—which suggest that further research on these hypotheses might be fruitful, and potentially verify them. Finally, §5 briefly explains how—if Paul and I are right—dominant cultural attitudes toward major life choices, child rearing, and moral education ought to be changed to put people in a better position to deal with life's transformative experiences through focusing on resilience rather than goal-satisfaction.

Before proceeding, I want to highlight this article's major presupposition. Some commentators have suggested that there is something "curious"—and dubious—about Paul's argument.[2] Paul, again, contends that some life-events (particularly child-birth) are so transformative that one can have *no rational grounds* for predicting likely outcomes on the basis

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[2] I thank two anonymous reviewers for raising these concerns.

of assessments of one's future lived experience.[3] According to Paul, one cannot have *any* reliable evidence prior to a genuine transformative experience—for instance, before giving birth to a child—whether one is likely to be happy or miserable with the decision. Just to be clear, Paul's argument is not that there are no rational grounds for making choices in cases of transformative experience *simpliciter*. Her argument is that no rational grounds can be adduced that are *consistent with dominant cultural and philosophical norms* (viz. expectations about *how one's life is likely to be* as a parent).

An obvious objection to Paul's argument is that a person *may* have some good evidential grounds for assigning probabilities to different outcomes based on (i) their personal preferences, (ii) past experiences with children, and/or (iii) knowledge of how happy people similar to them have or have not been bearing children. So, for example, consider the following the two hypothetical individuals (cases which I have adapted from a set of anonymous comments):

> **Ms. Child-Oriented:** "I have a moderate affection for children, and although I think I may find caring for a child full time somewhat onerous I do not really mind investing time in this. I have also always assumed I would have a child of my own—and I have personally known people very similar to me, people who wanted children themselves, who are very happy their decision to have children."

> **Ms. Child-Adverse:** "I do not really like children and, when I think about it, I resent the time that I imagine taking care of a child would necessitate. I have also personally known several people just like me who resented having children."

Offhand, Ms. Child-Oriented seems to have rational grounds to have a child despite her uncertainty (she has evidence that she likes children, etc.). In contrast, Ms. Child-Averse seems rational grounds to avoid it (she has evidence she despises children, etc.). Further, why not think

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[3] Paul (forthcoming a): §§4-5.

that a person may have some rational grounds for believing that a potentially transformative decision is likely to develop or enhance some part of themselves that they value? For instance, suppose I value my capacity to care for loved ones and wish to develop this part of myself, but my life up until now has been dominated by a self-directed focus on my career. Might I not reasonably expect that having a child will help me develop this capacity precisely *because* having a child would transform my life, bringing a child into my life that I would need to care for (thus developing my ability to care for loved ones)? Finally, why not think that general cultural recommendations (viz. having children is a part of a well-lived life) give a person rational grounds for assigning likelihoods to different outcomes?

Paul responds to these types of objections at length.[4] In brief, Paul argues that the very nature of transformative experience undermines these objections. According to Paul, having a child is not only *epistemically* transformative, giving one knowledge of things one could not know previously (e.g. how happy one is likely to be with a child of one's own); it can also be *personally* transformative, dramatically changing *oneself*—one's values, one's self-conception, etc.—in deep and far-reaching ways that cannot be rationally anticipated.[5] Having a child, for instance, may turn previously "child-oriented" people into child-averse people (people who thought they would be happy having a child, but are not). Conversely, having a child may turn previously "child-averse people" into child-oriented people (people who thought they would dislike having a child but are, after the fact, glad they did).[6] Similarly, according to Paul, the fact that a person values something about themselves prior to a transformative experience (e.g. caring for others) is no reason to think that they are likely to value that thing or effectively pursue it after the transformative experience occurs (viz. they may wish, after making the decision, that they had

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[4] Ibid: §6.
[5] Ibid: 7-8.
[6] Ibid: §6.1.

cared *more about themselves;* or, alternatively, they might value caring about others, but having a child might make them no less selfish than before). Thus, Paul claims, as tempting as it may be to think that people can rationally assign probabilities to expected outcomes on the basis of "self-knowledge" (about child-aversion, etc.), the very nature of transformative experience undermines all such arguments.

Paul's critics may, of course, reject these arguments. My aim in this article, however, is not to settle these matters. Rather, my aim is to show that if Paul's arguments *are* sound, (1) there is still a way to rationally approach transformative experiences (through resilience), (2) this solution should motivate future research on resilience, and (3) the solution has important implications for how we should make life choices and raise children. Although this project may not appeal to some of Paul's critics, it should be of interest to those sympathetic with her argument. It is also, I submit, of clear independent interest to explicate *what follows* from her argument if, contrary to what her critics allege, her argument is sound.

§1. Paul's Argument Summarized and Augmented

According to Paul, dominant cultural norms today instruct us to make major life-decisions on the basis of careful reflection on our *personal goals and expectations* of what will bring us happiness and fulfillment. So, for instance, in the case of the decision of whether to have children,

> Guides for prospective parents often suggest that people ask themselves if having a baby will enhance an already happy life, and encourage prospective parents to reflect on, for example, how they see themselves in five and ten years' time, whether they feel ready to care for and nurture the human being they've created, whether they think they'd be a happy and content mother (or father), whether having a baby of their own would make life more meaningful, whether they are ready for the tradeoffs that come with being a

parent, whether they desire to continue with their current career plans or other personal projects, and so on.[7]

In short, dominant cultural norms dictate that if, after careful reflection, a person (or couple) thinking of having a child judges that having a child is likely to bring them an outcome they desire (happiness, fulfillment, etc.), it is rational for them to choose to have a child. On the other hand, if after careful reflection the person (or couple) judges that having a child is *not likely* to make them happy, fulfilled, or otherwise serve their life goals, it is rational to remain childless. As Paul points out, this is a very common way of thinking:

> Many prospective parents decide to have a baby because they have a deep desire to have children based on the (perhaps inarticulate) sense that having a child will help them to live a fuller, happier, and somehow complete life…This assessment of one's prospects and plans for the future is a culturally important part of the procedure that one is supposed to undergo before attempting to get pregnant.[8]

Paul also speculates that this way of thinking may have emerged from, "a contemporary ideal of personal psychological development through choice. That is, a modern conception of self-realization involves the notion that one achieves a kind of maximal self-fulfillment through making reflective, rational choices about the sort of person one wants to be."[9] Although this is admittedly speculation on her part, the point seems apt. Modern cultural standards clearly do instruct people to make most, if not all, major life-decisions in terms of a person's goals about "who they want to be" in the future. People are told to choose colleges, college majors, career paths, even romantic partners, primarily on the basis of careful judgments about "what we want out of life." So, for instance, dominant cultural norms tell us: if what you really care about in life

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[7] Ibid: 2.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid: 21.

is making a lot of money, your college major should be something like business or finance rather than religious studies or creative writing, and after graduation you should become a banker or stock-broker. On the other hand, if what you really want out of life is to create works of art, and you are not the kind of person who cares all that much about money, then you should choose to be an artist, not a banker. Similarly, consider how people are instructed to "choose romantic partners." The dominant cultural norm today is to choose people to date who "share your values." There are Christian dating sites for Christians, adult dating sites for people interested in "no strings attached" liasons, etc. If you are someone who cares about money, financial security, and "the finer things in life", dominant cultural norms clearly dictate that you should date and marry someone who wants the same.

Following Paul's remarks about these norms being a result of a contemporary ideal of self-realization, I think it is worth pointing out that the norms promise a certain kind of comfort and safety. The norms clearly embody, after all, a sense in which we are in control of our own lives. According to the norms, it is up to each of us to "find ourselves"—to figure out what we really want out of life, and plan our lives accordingly. We should choose "the job that is right to us", have children "when it is right for us", date and/or marry "people who are right for us", and so on. These goals and choices fit into a mental picture we create to neatly summarize the "ideal" life we imagine for ourselves.

The picture also corresponds, Paul points out, to a dominant philosophical theory of rational decision-making: namely, decision theory. Decision theory holds that,

> To make a choice rationally, we first determine the possible outcomes of each act we might perform. After we have the space of possible outcomes, we determine the value (or utility) of each outcome, and determine the probability of each outcome's occurring given the performance of the act. We then calculate the expected value of each outcome by

multiplying the value of the outcome by its probability, and choose to perform the act

with the outcome or outcomes with the highest overall expected value.[10]

In short, decision theory tells us to (I) figure out which outcomes we (most) want, (II) assign

probabilities to those outcomes, and finally (III) select whichever action maximizes the

probability of the best outcome. This is precisely the model presupposed by the cultural norms

discussed above. For instance, when it comes to having children, social norms instruct us to (i)

reflect carefully on what we want (e.g. we want to be happy and fulfilled), (ii) assign probabilities

to outcomes (e.g. "is having a child likely to make me happy and fulfilled?"), and finally (iii) select

whichever action can be expected to produce the best outcome (e.g. "Having a child now is likely

to make me happy and fulfilled. I am financially and emotionally ready for a child, and am

confident that my life is likely to be a happier and more fulfilled with a child rather than without

one. So I will have a child.").

However comforting this approach to rational decision-making may be, Paul argues,

persuasively in my view, that it is a fundamentally mistaken way to approach major life-

decisions. Here, in brief, is her argument. The approach to rational decision-making just

discussed—decision theory—presupposes that a person can have some idea, *in advance,* of

which outcomes are more desirable than which. For example, in order for a person to make a

rational decision about whether to have a child, the person must have some idea of whether they

are more likely to get what they want (e.g. happiness or fulfillment) by having a child or

remaining childless. But, Paul argues, however much society might teach us to believe that we

can have some idea of which outcomes of major life-decisions are more desirable than which,

our life experiences teach us that this assumption is false. Some life experiences, particularly,

the experience of having a child, are so deeply transformative that one cannot have any idea,

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[10] Ibid: 3.

prior to actually having the experience, of which outcome (e.g. having a child, or not having one) is more desirable than which.[11]

Here is how Paul makes the case for this. She has us reflect, first, on a famous thought-experiment by the philosopher Frank Jackson.[12] Jackson asks us to imagine a woman, Mary, who has spent her entire life up to a certain point living in a completely black-and-white environment, such that she has never seen colors like yellow, green, red, and so on. As Paul points out, because Mary does not know what it is like to see these colors, she cannot possibly know whether she will enjoy them, be revolted by them, etc. For all she knows, upon seeing red and green for the first time, she may find red attractive and green revolting, or she might feel precisely the opposite. She simply cannot know. The same is true, Paul argues, of bearing a child, because having a child is a genuinely transformative experience. Because Paul's explanation of this is so clear and persuasive, allow me to quote it at length:

> Before someone becomes a parent, she has never experienced the unique state of seeing and touching her newborn child. She has never experienced the full compendium of the extremely intense series of beliefs, emotions, physical exhaustion and emotional intensity that attends the carrying, birth, presentation, and care of her very own child, and hence she does not know what it is like to have these experiences.

> Moreover, since having one's own child is unlike any other human experience, before she has had the experience of seeing and touching her newborn child, not only does she not

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[11] If this is the case—if one cannot specify likely outcomes on the basis of expected future experience—one might wonder why the choice to have children would ever even occur to people. One obvious, and intuitive, answer is that human beings tend to be "biologically programmed" to want children, whether it is rational or not. Another intuitive answer is that we are socialized to want children, and/or face social pressures to have them. I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify this.

[12] Ibid: 6-8. See Jackson (1986).

know what it is like to have a child, she cannot know. Like the experience of seeing color for the first time, the experience of having a child is not projectable. All of this means that having a child is epistemically transformative.[13]

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Perhaps the primary basis for the radical change in phenomenology in both parents is the simple fact that the content of the state of *seeing and touching your own newborn child* can carry with it an epistemically unique and personally transformative phenomenological character. This may be the source of why this experience is both epistemically and personally transformative.[14]

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The combination of the epistemically and personally transformative experience of having one's own child brings with it profound changes in other epistemic states. In particular, because you cannot know what it is like to have your own child before you've had her, you also cannot know what emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions will be caused by what it's like to have her. Maybe you'll feel joy and elation when she is born. Or maybe you'll feel anger and despair (many parents experience postnatal depression). And so on. Moreover, you can't know what it'll be like to have the particular emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions that are caused by your experience of having your child. As a result, if you have a child, and if your experience is both epistemically and personally transformative, many of your epistemic states will change in subjectively unprojectable ways, and many of these changes will be profound changes.[15]

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[13] Paul (forthcoming a): 8.
[14] Ibid: 9.
[15] Ibid.

Paul makes her case for the transformative-ness of child-bearing mostly at an intuitive level, on the basis of women's experiences having children (though she does cite some empirical literature on childbearing as well). It is worth emphasizing, though, that she is not merely waxing philosophical. First, there are numerous support groups online for parents who wish they hadn't had children: evidently many such people discover that the reality of having children is profoundly different (and worse) than their expectations going in.[16] Second, there is an emerging psychological literature showing just how pervasive the dilemma she presents is in life. There is substantial empirical evidence that individuals' preferences (i.e. their goals) change, and even reverse, dramatically over time in ways that they do not expect. It is a simple, empirically verified fact about human beings that "they often have little idea of what they will like next year or even tomorrow."[17] It is very common for people to experience *preference-reversals*: wanting one thing at an earlier time and the opposite thing at a later time.[18] This is in large part because people are demonstrably poor at *affective forecasting*: about knowing how they will feel when they "get what they wanted."[19] It is also the case because human beings appear to adopt two, often incompatible perspectives in expressing preferences: people have (a) prospective preferences about how they want the future to be, but (b) very different retrospective preferences about how they wish the past was.[20] As Kahneman notes, it is very much as though people have two selves: a self that has preferences about the future, and a self that has preferences about the past.[21] Yet decision theory assumes a stable account of outcomes. In decision-theory, a person's *preference-function* (an ordering of their preferences) determines

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[16] See e.g. http://www.experienceproject.com/stories/Wish-Id-Never-Had-Children/905496
[17] Kahneman (2011): 269.
[18] Ibid: chapter 33.
[19] Ibid: 399.
[20] Ibid: chapter 35
[21] Ibid.

what counts as "better" and "worse" outcomes. However, if, on the contrary, we have two sets of preferences – forward-looking ones and backward-looking ones, which can and do often conflict – decision-theory can provide no coherent of what's rational for a person.[22] It may be rational for me to perform an action *relative-to-my-future-based-preferences* but irrational for me to perform that very same action *relative-to-my-past-directed-preferences*. But this is just to say that there is no rational decision (any decision is both "rational and irrational", which is a contradiction). Notice that, fundamentally, these seem to be Paul's points about childbirth. Having a child may satisfy the preferences one had before having the child but be against one's preferences after one actually has the child. Psychological research shows that human beings are in this situation not just in the case of having children, but in general throughout our lives. One can "get what one wanted" and yet no longer want it.

Indeed, I submit that many (if not most) of us—particularly those of us who "have lived long enough"—are familiar enough with this sort of problem in everyday life. We sometimes think a particular job or occupation is likely to make us happy, only to find out later that it in fact makes us miserable because we really had no idea what the job or occupation would actually be like before we got it. Similarly, we sometimes think a particular partner or spouse—or simply being married or in a relationship—is likely to make us happy, but we end up miserable, divorced or heartbroken. Of course, sometimes the opposite kinds of transformations occur. We may think that we will likely be miserable in a particular job, or "tied down" in a particular relationship, only to find out (once we end up in the job or in the relationship) that we are happy and fulfilled, quite to our surprise. Consider, for example, the famous film *When Harry Met Sally*—a tale of two individuals, Harry and Sally, who spend over a decade convinced that they are "wrong for each other" but eventually fall in love. The film has struck a chord with audiences

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[22] Ibid: 411.

over the years for one obvious reason: it is a profoundly vivid dramatic depiction of something that many of us know all too well from experience—that life, indeed, has a funny way of surprising and transforming us, in ways that we cannot possibly predict.

Some readers might think there are simple solutions to the problem Paul presents—for example, that even if we have never had children ourselves (or been married, etc.), we can still develop a good, or perhaps just *some*, idea of what the outcomes of different choices are likely to be. For instance, one might suggest that if you have never had a child, you should reflect on your emotional experiences when around other people's children (do you find them cute, or do you respond negatively?), and perhaps even spend time taking care of others' children (changing diapers, etc.). Again, couldn't these types of experiences give you at least some idea of what having your own child will be like—whether it will make you happy, miserable, etc.? Indeed, there is a cultural norm for "trying things out" when it comes to making certain major life decisions. Cultural norms today instruct people to "date around", trying different types of romantic partners "on for size" to see what type of person "fits" best. Many couples have a "trial period" of living together before they decide to get engaged. Young adults are encouraged to "try out" various occupations (e.g., through internships, etc.).

Paul argues, however—persuasively, in my own view—that this sort of response fails to appreciate precisely how deeply transformative life experiences can be. There is a fundamental difference, for instance, between one's experiences with other people's children and the experience one has with one's own child. Often enough, parents who are not fond of other people's children love and adore their own; conversely, some people who find other people's children adorable find life with a child of their own unbearably difficult (indeed, as Paul points

out, post-partum depression is a very common experience unique to childbearing mothers).[23] And the same is arguably true of many other major life choices.

Again, however, it is not my aim to defend Paul's argument here. Instead, I would like to focus on what the argument implies *if* it is sound. In what follows, I assume that there is no "direct" solution to the problem Paul poses: that many of life's experiences are so transformative that it is difficult to ascertain a rational choice to make about them. The question I will now ask is this: is there any other, more indirect way of solving the problem?

§2. An Indirect Solution to the Problem of Transformative Experience

I assume we can all agree that we human beings have limited abilities to control how we respond to life events. Even the most psychologically healthy and well-adjusted individual cannot typically help feeling severe grief and even anger, say, at the death of a loved one. We are not emotionless machines, and our lives do not unfold perfectly. We are sentient beings who must regulate our own emotions, and the success with which we do so varies depending on the situation. Even so, contemporary empirical psychology demonstrates that we are capable of developing significant amounts of control over how we respond to things. People can develop and display psychological and behavioral *resilience*—a general ability to navigate life psychologically, socially, culturally, and physically in ways that sustain their own personal well-being[24], to not be "defeated" by negative life events, and deal with them in productive rather than unproductive ways.[25] People low in resilience have been found to experience difficulty in managing negative emotions, demonstrate heightened sensitivity to disappointments and life tragedies, and have higher daily levels of stress than more resilient people[26]. More resilient

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[23] Paul (forthcoming a): §6.1.
[24] See Ungar (2008) and Zautra et al. (2010).
[25] Maasten (2009): 29.
[26] Ong et al. (2006).

people, on the other hand, have been found to experience more positive emotions in the presence of daily stressors, have lower levels of depression[27], and report lower levels of cigarette and alcohol use than individuals who score lower in resilience.[28]   Finally, and most importantly, resilience is something that can be developed. Among other things, resilience results from the development of certain intellectual and self-regulation skills: cognitive and emotional skills to persist through serious life-difficulties and disappointments.[29]

With these points in mind, let us return to the phenomenon in question: transformative experience. If Paul is right—and again, I am assuming her argument to be sound—when it comes to major life decisions, it is impossible to specify likely outcomes *at the time the decision has to be made*. One simply cannot have any good idea, for instance, whether one is likely to be happier and more fulfilled with children or without. Suppose, then, that we simply accept Paul's conclusion at face value: we accept that major, potentially-transformative life decisions cannot be made rationally—that they are essentially "steps into the unknown." If this is indeed a fact of life, it suggests something interesting: that the decisions we make in life are not nearly as important as how we are disposed to handle the results of those decisions, whatever they may be. Focusing on our ability to cope with the outcomes of our decisions would seem like the only rational way to respond to the problem Paul poses. That is, if one cannot have any idea of which major life choices are likely to be optimal, the only rational way to respond is to manage what *is* under one's control: one's overall manner of handling whichever outcomes any decision might generate. Resilience, insofar as it is a stable and robust psychological disposition to respond in a positive, adaptive manner to unexpected life-events, is uniquely well-suited to address the epistemic and personal transformations that transformative experiences present (viz. even if

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[27] Engmann (2013).
[28] Bonanno et al (2007).
[29] Maasten (2009).

one's personal goals/values are transformed, one will be disposed to respond resiliently). Allow me to explain.

Compare two very different people facing the decision with which Paul is concerned: the decision of whether to have a child. Let us call the first person *Ms. Resilient* and the second person *Mr. Non-Resilient*. Next, let us stipulate that both of these individuals are faced with the same "Problem of Transformative Experience"—namely, they have no idea whether they are likely to be happy or miserable, fulfilled or unfulfilled, etc., either with a child or without. If Paul is right, neither of them can make a rational decision. So, let us say that both of them have to take some step "into the unknown." Since having a child or not having one is an "either/or" proposition (one must do one or the other), no matter which choice Ms. Resilient or Mr. Non-Resilient make, they may turn out happy or they may turn out unhappy. Be that as it may, if Ms. Resilient has developed strong psychological dispositions to be resilient, she knows that no matter which outcome her choice (to have a child or not have one) results in, *she is likely to deal with the outcomes in a psychologically productive way generally supportive of her well-being—and indeed, face better probable outcomes, than Mr. Non-Resilient*. First, no matter the results of her choice are, Ms. Resilient is likely to have lower daily levels of stress, and experience more positive emotions to daily stressors, than Mr. Non-Resilient.[30] Second, even if things go very bad for her— if, for example, she bears a child with a severe congenital disorder and endures substantial emotional and financial toil as a result—Ms. Resilient possesses psychological strength that makes her less likely to respond in self-destructive, unproductive ways. Thus, although negative outcomes could result from whatever choice she makes, at the very least, she is the kind of person who is disposed to respond productively, and positively, to *whatever* happens. Now contrast her to Mr. Non-Resilient, someone who, for one reason or another, has never developed

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[30] Ong et al. (2006) and Engmann (2013).

resilience. When bad things happen to Mr. Non-Resilient, he tends to respond in particularly unproductive ways.[31] In the past, he has repeatedly responded poorly to disappointments and setbacks, displaying high emotionality and lashing out at others. As such, when it comes to the question of whether he should have a child, Mr. Non-Resilient can reasonably expect the following: if the outcome of whatever choice he makes (i.e. to have a child or not have one) is one that profoundly disappoints him, he is likely to respond in a psychologically and behaviorally (self-)destructive manner *not* supportive of his long-term well-being. Here, in short, are what Ms. Resilient and Mr. Non-Resilient know about themselves:

> **Ms. Resilient** knows that no matter which choice she makes, and whichever outcomes may result, she is likely to respond in productive ways supportive of her well-being.

> **Mr. Non-Resilient** knows that no matter what choice he makes, if negative outcomes result, he is likely to respond poorly, in a way not supportive of his well-being.

The point then is this: the standard philosophical model of rationality—decision theory—entails that if we can choose between being like Ms. Resilient or Mr. Non-Resilient, it is *rational* to choose to be like Ms. Resilient. No matter what happens to either of them, Ms. Resilient faces *better likely outcomes* than Mr. Non-Resilient. We can represent this line of thought within the standard, decision-theoretic model of rational action as follows. When it comes to the decision of whether to have a child, Ms. Resilient and Mr. Non-Resilient both face radical uncertainty. They cannot know what the likely outcomes of either decision is, as illustrated in the following table:

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[31] Ong et al. (2006)

Table 1. First Pass at a Decision-Theoretic Matrix for Childbearing

<u>Possible Choices</u>	<u>Expected Outcomes</u>
Have a child	**Misery x (probability=?) = ?** **Neither misery nor happiness x (?) = ?** **Happiness x (?) = ?**
Don't have a child	**Misery x (?) = ?** **Neither misery nor happiness x (?) = ?** **Happiness x (?) = ?**

This table, however, does not tell the whole story. For again, Ms. Resilient, as a resilient person, tends to make the best of *whichever* outcomes result.[32] In contrast, Mr. Non-Resilient, as a non-resilient person, tends to handle bad events particularly poorly.[33] Thus, let us say that Ms. Resilience's resilience tends to add "5 units of happiness" to whichever outcomes arise from her choice, and that Mr. Non-Resilience's lack of resilience results in a loss of 5 units of happiness in the case of bad outcomes. Although these are of course artificial numbers, the basic ideas here—that (A) resilient people respond more positively than non-resilient people to a wide variety of outcomes, and (B) non-resilient people handle bad outcomes particularly badly—are, again, well-supported by our best empirical knowledge. Accordingly, Table 1 does not represent the true payoff matrix for Ms. Resilient and Mr. Non-Resilient. Their actual payoff matrix is much better represented by the following table:

Table 2. Ms. Resilient's and Mr. Non-Resilient's Actual Decision-Matrices

Ms. Resilient's Payoff Matrix

<u>Choices</u>	<u>Expected Outcomes</u>
Have a child	**Misery x (probability=?) = ?+5** **Neither misery nor happiness x (?) = ?+5** **Happiness x (?) = ?+5**
Don't have a child	**Misery x (probability=?) = ? +5** **Neither misery nor happiness x (?) = ?+5** **Happiness x (?) = ?+5**

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[32] Again, see Maasten (2009) and Engmann (2013).
[33] Ong et al. (2006).

Mr. Non-Resilient's Payoff Matrix

Choices	Expected Outcomes
Have a child	**Misery x (probability=?) = ?-5** **Neither misery nor happiness x (?) = ?** **Happiness x (?) = ?**
Don't have a child	**Misery x (probability=?) = ?-5** **Neither misery nor happiness x (?) = ?** **Happiness x (?) = ?**

Notice that Paul's puzzle still holds: *neither* Ms. Resilient nor Mr. Non-Resilient can make a rational decision, for they both still face radical uncertainty about the expected outcomes of their available decisions. The important thing, however, is that *all* of Ms. Resilient's possible outcomes are better than Mr. Non-Resilient's – in which case their correct payoff matrix is as follows:

Table 3. The Resilience Matrix[34]

Choices	Expected Outcomes in Life's Transformative Experiences
Be like Ms. Resilient (i.e. develop psychological resilience)	**Misery x (?) = ?+5** **Neither misery nor happiness x (?) = ?+5** **Happiness x (?) = ?+5** _____ . **Expected Utility = ?+5**
Be like Mr. Non-Resilient (i.e. do not develop psychological resilience)	**Misery x (?) = ?-5** **Neither misery nor happiness x (?) = ?** **Happiness x = ?** _____ . **Expected Utility = ?-5**

Even though neither individual can make a rational decision about whether to have a child based on the standard model, we can make a rational decision about *who* to be like. We rationally ought to aim to be like Ms. Resilient, because she is the best equipped, on the whole, to deal life's transformative experiences.

Some readers may object that this line of reasoning misses Paul's point about the nature of transformative experiences: namely, that some experiences—such as giving birth to a child—

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[34] Note: Expected utilities are normally calculated by summing possible outcomes multiplied by their individual probabilities. In this case, however, probabilities are unknown. Thus, the expected outcomes for being like Ms. Resilient/Mr. Non-Resilient can simply be understood in terms of *utility increases/decreases* attached to those unknowns—which is what Table 3 represents.

are so truly, deeply transformative that is simply no way to prepare oneself to respond to them one way or another. Return, after all, to the analogous case Paul discusses: Mary, the woman in the black-and-white room. How can she possibly prepare in advance for something—namely, experiencing colors like red, yellow, and green—when she has never experienced them before? By a similar token, how can a person develop psychological resilience for life experiences such as childbirth, which one has never had before?

In response, I think it is important to clearly distinguish what I am claiming from what I am not. I am not claiming that we can develop capacities for psychological resilience that we know, infallibly in advance, will deal well with particular transformative life-experiences such as childbirth. Sometimes, after all, even the most resilient person has trouble with a difficult infant, a difficult marriage, etc. These events all have the potential (particularly if they co-occur) to drive an otherwise resilient person to despair. Despite this, empirical research shows that resilience is a very robust, stable trait that enables people to respond positively to a wide variety of life events, including particularly negative ones.[35] Thus, even if having a child is a transformative experience—changing oneself deeply and profoundly, one's values and expectations, etc. – our best evidence shows that resilient people have a stable disposition to respond to such changes *more positively* than non-resilient people. People who lack resilience are more likely to respond to difficult, transformative life events in unhealthy, self-destructive ways. I do not claim that we can do anything in advance to ensure that we handle transformative life experiences such as childbirth well. Sometimes life overwhelms us: as Paul notes, the flood of hormones that women and men experience during and after childbirth can have unexpected and overpowering effects.[36] No one can guarantee how individuals react to transformative life experiences. However, the

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[35] Again, see See Ungar (2008) and Zautra et al. (2010).
[36] Paul (forthcoming a): 9.

intuitive and empirically-supported claim I make here still stands: that by developing resilience, a person can *rationally* put themselves in the best possible psychological position to deal well with transformative life experiences.

§3. Further Implications of the Indirect Solution, and Avenues for Future Research

One obvious worry to have about my argument is that it does not solve the particular problem Paul presented. Paul's problem, after all, was that transformative experiences make it impossible to make *specific* decisions (e.g. to have a child or not) on rational grounds. My argument, however, has not shown that it is possible to choose to have a child on rational grounds. My argument has at most shown that if it is *not* possible to make such a choice on rational grounds, the only rational response is to develop resilience.

In one sense, I am happy to accept this worry. The most basic point of this paper is that if Paul's specific problem has no direct solution—if we cannot make any particular choice (to have a child or not) on rational grounds in cases of transformative experience—this *rationally mandates a different approach to living our lives*: a "resilience development" model of life-choices that stands in stark opposite to dominant cultural norms, which emphasize choosing on the basis personal preferences and values. This is, I submit, an important and interesting result. It shows that if Paul's problem has no solution, we have rational grounds to live differently, with different goals in mind—resilience development—than those (of personal development) currently emphasized by dominant cultural norms.

At the same time, I want to suggest that further empirical research on resilience *might* solve Paul's problem—establishing the indirect rationality of one choice (e.g. to have a child) over another (not having one), even in cases of transformative experience. Allow me to explain.

Consider, to begin with, "traditional" cultural norms for family life and child-bearing, norms that have fallen out of favor in modern Western democracies, but which are, I expect,

familiar enough to most of us. Just a few generations ago in the United States, it was a cultural norm for people to enter marriage and bear children at much younger age than today. In the 1950's, for instance, the median age of marriage for American men and women was, respectively, 22.8 and 20.3—whereas, as of 2010, the respective medians were 28.2 and 26.1.[37] Similarly, the median age of first childbirth for women in the US has risen from 21 in the 1970's to 25 in 2006.[38] Although many rationales may be given for marrying and having children at a young age, one common idea is that marriage and childbearing "mature" people, turning them "into responsible adults." Indeed, such ideas are even not uncommon today. One often hears similar things from recently married people, or people after they have had children—things like, "I was so irresponsible before marriage and children. But, now I have to be responsible. I have a spouse and children to care for, after all." Further, in recent years, many commentators have raised worries about the extent to which new cultural trends—trends of delaying marriage, children, and careers on the basis of personal preferences and exploration—have resulted in a "delayed adolescence", a kind of failure among many young adults to develop adaptive forms of emotional and behavioral maturity.[39]

Although we can only speculate given current empirical knowledge of resilience, I want to suggest that there are two ways that future research on resilience might show that it can be indirectly rational to have children—as part of a *resilient life*—even if Paul's arguments regarding transformative experience are otherwise sound. First, suppose empirical research on resilience were to find that resilient individuals are more likely to *desire children* than people who are less resilient. This is not implausible, I submit, as more resilient people may be less likely

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[37] Figures are from the US Bureau of the Census, as reported at http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005061.html (accessed on May 28, 2014).

[38] http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db21.htm (accessed on May 28, 2014).

[39] See e.g. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/magazine/22Adulthood-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 and http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18482794 (both accessed on May 28, 2014).

to "fear the unknown" than less resilient people (viz. "I am a stable and resilient person. I am ready for a child"). More resilient people, after all, may very well have *self-knowledge* that they are able to "deal with the unexpected" adaptively, and thus be less afraid of potentially transformative choices (e.g. having children) than less resilient people. If future research on resilience were to bear out this hypothesis, such research would give us rational grounds for becoming the *kind of people*—resilient people—who tend to desire children. Although this would not, obviously, imply that people have rational grounds to have children *per se*, it would entail that people have rational grounds to be the kinds of people who tend to *want* children (an interesting result). Second, suppose empirical research on resilience found that the very act of having a child tends to lead to *increased resilience* later in life. This hypothesis is not implausible, I submit, insofar as habitual practice handling disappointments and stressors—as opposed to trying to avoid these things—is known to lead to lead to increased resilience.[40] Because children complicate life, giving rise to daily disappointments and stressors that childless people may not face, having children may indirectly increase resilience later in life. If this turns out to be the case, then even if having a child is a transformative experience in Paul's sense—and even if Paul is right that one cannot know that one is likely to be *happier* with a child than without—deciding to have a child may still be rational as an indirect means for achieving greater resilience later in life, something which a rational agent can know is likely to lead them to be able to cope better with later life-events (e.g. career disappointments, etc.), whatever those events might be.

Although these are only speculative hypotheses at this point, my argument suggests that these are important avenues for further research. *If* Paul is right about the nature of transformative experience, future research on resilience may be crucial to helping us understand how to live rationally.

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[40] Maasten (2009).

§4. Objections, and Replies

Objection 1 (Disappointing/Implausible Implications): Some readers might worry that my argument entails—either disappointingly or implausibly, or both—that we should merely aim to become the kind of people who can "grin and bear" whatever choices we make. Some readers may worry that this is just not good enough—that what we really wanted to know is whether we can make rational decisions in the case of transformative experiences (viz. decisions about whether to have children), not whether it is rational to be the kind of people who can "grin and bear" whatever decisions we make, no matter how awful the results.

My reply: Although my argument's implications may seem disappointing or implausible to readers who are steeped in the very cultural beliefs and norms that Paul's argument calls into question (e.g. the belief that our choices should be dictated by our personal goals, preferences, etc.), there is a long lineage of social traditions that *emphasize* the very kinds of "disappointing" prescriptions my argument entails, as well as emerging psychological research which suggests that many "commonsense" ideas about how to make satisfying life-choices are mistaken.[41] As we saw earlier, until quite recently, dominant social norms in the United States and elsewhere emphasized early marriage and childbearing. Marriage and childbearing were not considered personal choices—or effective strategies to become happy—so much as they were considered natural and necessary parts of becoming *mature, responsible adults*. One was socially expected to "grow up, get married, have children, and be a responsible member of society." Contrast these expectations to social trends today—that is, to putting off marriage, children, and serious careers until a person's 30's (for which there is even a common new saying, "Thirty is the new twenty."). As we saw earlier, many commentators today worries that these new social norms—however

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[41] See e.g. Wilson (2011).

seductive they may be, in terms of modern ideals of personal preference and development—may actually be churning out less mature, less responsible adults.

Accordingly, although my argument's implications may be *unsettling*, disappointing even, if my argument is sound, the takeaway of my argument should be that these are unsettling *truths.* If my argument is correct, more traditional attitudes toward major life-choices—the view that our choices should *not* be based primarily on our own preferences or values (or even on our own satisfaction), but rather aim to turn us into *mature, responsible, resilient people*—contain a real, important element of truth, an element which Paul's argument about transformative experiences should lead us to better appreciate.

Objection 2 (Does resilience speak to the question?): A second objection can be expressed in a series of questions. "What good is resilience if one has an absolutely miserable transformative experience? Will it help me to think in advance that if I'm not happy with the outcome I know I'll be able to put up with it? That's a factor in risk calculation, but what has it got to do with a future which is completely unknown to me? How do I know my resilience will be called upon?"

Reply: The very point of Paul's paper is that miserable transformative experiences can happen to us, and that there is *nothing* we can rationally do to anticipate or avoid them. In contrast, the good of resilience is empirically well-established, and has often been at least implicitly defended precisely by those who suffer miserable life-experiences as a means for enduring them (e.g. Epictetus, who was a slave physically crippled by his master, argued for "stoicism" on such grounds). Resilience is rational to have precisely because, although one may not know if will be called upon, it is still the case that when it *is* called upon, it tends to contribute positively to one's well-being.

§5. Implications for Cultural Norms and Practices

If my argument is successful, then given that life contains profoundly life-altering transformative experiences, we should try to become, and raise our children to become, psychologically resilient people. We should aim to become resilient, and raise our children to be resilient, because it is a rational way to deal with life's transformative experiences.[42] Some obvious questions then arise. First, do modern cultures attach appropriate value to "resilience building"? Second, do modern cultures take adequate steps to foster resilience, particularly among young people during their most formative years? Unfortunately, I believe the answer to both questions is no. Allow me to explain.

There has been a widely discussed shift in childrearing practices over the past several decades toward what seems to be an ever-increasing focus on "building self-esteem." In youth sports, for instance, it is common practice today to "give everyone trophies." In schools and universities, the phenomenon of grade inflation—that is, students receiving higher average grades than in past decades—is pervasive. So too is the proverbial "helicopter parent", who is actively involved in most, if not all, aspects of their children's lives. All of these practices have something in common: they all involve insulating young people from risk and failure. This is important because recovering from failure is integral to building psychological resilience.[43]

The self-esteem movement in childrearing has not fared well from an empirical perspective or one of everyday experience. Psychological research has shown, for instance, that "self-esteem building" in schools in fact leads to *lower* grades.[44] In another, and I believe related,

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[42] I leave it an open question whether there may be other additional psycho-behavioral dispositions that might be rational to develop for handling transformative experiences. Also, I do not mean to imply that non-resilient people can never handle transformative experiences well. I merely mean to say that resilience is a *rational* way to handle transformative experiences well *more reliably*.

[43] Seligman (2011).

[44] Baumeister et al. (2005).

trend, young people are increasingly scoring higher in narcissism[45] and lower in empathy[46] than previous generations. In a nutshell, young people today are arguably being raised to have *too* much self-esteem, and not enough concern for other people. As a university instructor, the roots of these things seem obvious enough. Many of my students, by and large, appear to have never failed at anything. They have never received poor grades, for instance. Thus, when they receive a poor grade, they often seek to blame me as an instructor rather than look critically at their own work. This inability to learn from one's mistakes, and failure to seek positive meaning and growth in the face of negative circumstances, is not limited to university or school-aged children. Compared to previous generations, people today are notoriously fair-weathered, transitioning from job to job, and from spouse to spouse, etc. Finally, in another potentially relevant trend, incidences of mental illness ranging from ADHD to anxiety and depression—particularly amongst young people—have been continually on the upswing over the past several decades.[47] The forces behind this epidemic are undoubtedly complex, but it seems probable that an inability to cope with the difficulties and hardships in life are at least partly to blame.

What these trends seem to indicate, particularly among younger generations, is a conspicuous lack of psychological resilience. By being protected against risk and failure when they are young, people are becoming less prepared to deal with life disappointments—and transformative experiences—as they grow older. Contrast, for instance, a person who has dealt with little hardship before having a child from a person who knows that life is hard, and has dealt with many hardships before. Surely the person who has learned to deal effectively with hardships and transformative experiences in the past is more likely to deal effectively with the transformative experience of having a child. And yet, it seems like the average individual today

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[45] Twenge & Campbell (2010)
[46] Konrath et al. (2011).
[47] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2010).

is underprepared for hardships. Consider the American Psychological Association's recommendations for building psychological resilience[48]:

1. maintaining good relationships with close family members, friends and others;

2. to avoid seeing crises or stressful events as unbearable problems;

3. to accept circumstances that cannot be changed;

4. to develop realistic goals and move towards them;

5. to take decisive actions in adverse situations;

6. to look for opportunities of self-discovery after a struggle with loss;

7. developing self-confidence;

8. to keep a long-term perspective and consider the stressful event in a broader context;

9. to maintain a hopeful outlook, expecting good things and visualizing what is wished;

10. to take care of one's mind and body, exercising regularly, paying attention to one's own needs and feelings.

While modern society emphasizes some of these items—for instance, (1), (7), (9), and (10)—other items are clearly devalued today. Do dominant cultural norms encourage people to "accept circumstances that cannot be changed", as (3) recommends? Surely not. In fact, anthropologists have famously classified American culture as possessing the belief that humans can overcome and subjugate natural forces.[49] And what about recommendation (6), that is, looking for opportunities of self-discovery after struggle with a loss? Again, no. American society is notoriously achievement-oriented, placing importance on "being the best" through the

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[48] See "The Road to Resilience", by the American Psychological Association, http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx# (accessed on July 15, 2013).
[49] Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961).

attainment of goals and conspicuous success.[50] Such values are incongruent with learning to respond productively to disappointment or failure.

Conclusion

We have raised our children to believe, and in some cases we believe ourselves, that life is a kind of game—one that, if "played well", may get us "everything we want." But life is not like this. If we want to live rationally, and raise our children to live rationally, we need to learn to deal with life's transformative experiences by developing psychological resilience. And, to this end, there is some encouraging news: decades of research suggest that resilience can indeed be taught and learned.[51] Finally, future research on resilience may even clarify which potentially transformative life-choices are the most rational to make, as part of a resilient life.

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[50] Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson (2006).
[51] Seligman (2011)

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