

What's So Great About Experience?

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Abstract

Suppose that our life choices result in unpredictable experiences, as L.A. Paul has recently argued. What does this mean for the possibility of rational prudential choice? Not as much as Paul thinks. First, what's valuable about experience is its broadly hedonic quality, and empirical studies suggest we tend to significantly overestimate the impact of our choices in this respect. Second, contrary to what Paul suggests, the value of finding out what an outcome is like for us does not suffice to rationalize life choices, because much more important values are at stake. Third, because these other prudential goods, such as achievement, personal relationships, and meaningfulness, are typically more important than the quality of our experience (which is in any case unlikely to be bad when we achieve non-experiential goods), life choices should be made on what I call a story-regarding rather than experience-regarding basis.

On the standard picture of rational choice, we should choose the option that has the highest expected value. Expected value, in turn, is the sum of the values of possible outcomes of the option multiplied by their probability. The value of many possible outcomes, like eating some delicious chocolate, is largely a matter of *what it is like for us* to experience them. As I will say, the value they have is mainly *experiential value*. If we don't know what it's like to experience them, we won't be able to form well-grounded beliefs about their value, nor consequently make normatively significant rational choices regarding them.

In her novel and exciting *Transformative Experience*, L.A. Paul (2014) argues that especially when it comes to important life choices, such as choosing where to live or whether to have a child, the possible outcomes involve experiences that are *epistemically transformative* in the sense that we cannot know what they are like for us until we have actually experienced them, and hence cannot form rational estimates of their experiential

value, or *personally transformative* in the sense that they change out preferences in unpredictable ways. This calls into question the very possibility of making rational choices about such matters. Ultimately, however, Paul is not a skeptic. She believes that there is another kind of value of possible outcomes that can at least in some cases serve as the basis for rational and authentic choice, namely *revelatory value*: when we choose a transformative option, we choose to *find out what it is like* for us to experience the outcome, or find out what *we* will be like after the experience. Sometimes, then, it is rational to choose to come to learn what an experience is like or how we will change, she maintains.

In this paper, I will examine and reject three theses about the value of experience that feature in Paul's argument:

Non-Hedonism: The intrinsic value of an experience is not determined by its hedonic quality or contribution to happiness.

Value of Veridicality: Veridical experiences are more intrinsically valuable than non-veridical experiences.

Sufficiency of Revelatory Value: The value of coming to know what it is like for us to have epistemically transformative experiences or how our preferences change as a result of personally transformative experiences suffices to ground rational choice in (at least some) major life decisions.

(Note that Value of Veridicality entails Non-Hedonism, but not vice versa.) Against the first thesis, I argue that the intrinsic prudential value of experiences *is* exclusively hedonic (when understood broadly to encompass contribution to happiness). I provide an error theory for why other features of experience, such as variety or richness or particular phenomenal character, may seem intrinsically valuable. Against the second thesis, I argue that experiential value supervenes exclusively on the phenomenal character of experience, which

is identical between veridical and non-veridical experiences. Finally, I reject the sufficiency of revelatory value for important rational choices.¹ While it is indeed good for us to find out something about experiential value and ourselves, the good involved in such knowledge isn't great enough to justify choosing an option that may be very bad for us. It may be good to come to know the hard way that one hates being a parent, but the positive value of coming to know the unpleasant truth is radically outweighed by the risk of realizing the negative value of the unpleasant truth itself. In brief, no one should have a child in order to find out whether one hates or loves having a child, when much more important values are at stake.

If we can't anticipate what our experience will be like and revelatory value doesn't suffice for rational choice, must we make our life choices without a normatively significant rational basis? Only if there are no other significant prudential values that could do the job. Fortunately, there are. Many other things besides the quality of our experience are intrinsically good for us, and that is reflected in common preferences. For the purposes of my argument here, it doesn't matter precisely what these non-experiential goods are. Popular candidates include achievement, friendship, developing and exercising our rational capacities, and meaning in life. I have argued elsewhere (Kauppinen 2012, forthcoming b) that there is a notion of a prudentially good life story that nicely unifies these non-experiential values, and will employ the terminology in my sketch here, but one need not accept my particular account to see that there is room for cautious optimism about the possibility of rational life choices on the basis of non-experiential values, even if experience is transformative in the way Paul argues.

This optimism is further buttressed by two considerations regarding experiential value. First, precisely in the case of life choices, experiential value is relatively insignificant in comparison to non-experiential values like being in a valuable relationship or scientific

¹ While Paul at least suggests this thesis, as we'll see below, she has indicated in correspondence that she does not fully endorse it herself.

² It is true that Fred Feldman considers the possibility of what he calls truth-adjusted hedonism,

achievement. That is the truth in Mill's (1863, 14) notion that it's better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. So it may be rational to choose an option we anticipate to have high non-experiential value, even if it means risking bad experiences. Second, since what intrinsically matters about experience is its contribution to our happiness, we can look to the science of happiness to draw some conclusions about the likely effect of our choices. As it turns out, the most important result from the science of affective forecasting is that when it comes to major life events, we radically overestimate the difference they make. In fact, when it comes to experiential value, the result is likely to be a wash in the case of hard choices: in the long run, our average level of happiness is likely to be roughly the same whether we, say, have a child or not have a child, except for exceptional outcomes, whose broadly hedonic quality is predictable.

In brief, our life choices, in particular, should be *story-regarding* rather than *experience-regarding* in order to be rational in the normatively significant sense. We shouldn't be concerned with how they will affect our experience, but rather, roughly, with what they mean for the successful pursuit of something objectively valuable that builds on our past efforts and experiences, and is consistent with our commitments. This is the rule followed, for example, by those who choose to have a child because they see it as the next stage in their evolving relationship with someone they love, and those who choose not to have a child because they dedicate themselves to some cause they believe in.

1. Experiential Value Is Broadly Hedonic

Here are some experiences I'm confident it is good for at least some of us to have (or so my own experience suggests):

Tasting Gino's raspberry ice cream

Performing music with friends in front of an excited audience

Hearing your son come up with a delightful new word

Feeling the medication take effect

Note that we often individuate experiences by reference to their content, as I do in the list – I am talking about the experience of performing music, for example, not about the action that results in the experience. (One might, theoretically, have the experience without the action.) Sometimes we can also talk about experiencing the *taste* of ice cream, say. Other experiences, such as the feeling when the medication starts to work, don't have such content. Further, it is not trivial to provide a criterion for identifying *an* experience – we say that some people experienced World War II, which, if true, is very different from experiencing what it's like to eat a bowl of ice cream. For my purposes, these distinctions are unimportant, and I will continue to refer to experiences in various ways.

Here are some experiences I'm confident it is bad for at least some of us to have (or so my own experience suggests):

Eating Hershey's chocolate

Getting tongue-tied and flustered in front of an audience of respected colleagues

Losing a parent

Placing a hand on top of burning hot steam rising from a sauna stove

What is good or bad about these experiences? One obvious candidate is that some are pleasant and others are unpleasant. It is not, in my view, felicitous to say, in general, that the experiences *cause* pleasure or displeasure. This way of speaking suggests that pleasure and pain are sensations that are distinct from the experience. It is better to say that pleasure and displeasure are aspects of the experiences: it is part of what it is to like to have the experience that it is pleasant or unpleasant. The hedonic quality of an experience is part of its

phenomenal character. If one person's experience of eating Hershey's chocolate is unpleasant and another person's experience of it is pleasant, they don't have the same experience of eating chocolate. This way of thinking about pleasure does not commit us to think that there is any single common experiential quality common to all pleasant experiences: as far as it goes, they may be many distinct ways of being pleasant. (For the purposes of this paper, I am not going to take a stand on the nature of pleasure.)

So here is a hypothesis about the value of experience:

(Prudential) Hedonism About Experiential Value

What is intrinsically valuable about experience for someone is its hedonic quality: when it comes to experience considered merely as such, the more pleasant it is like to have the experience, the better it is for the subject to have the experience.

Note that (Prudential) Hedonism About Experiential Value (HEV) is distinct from hedonism *sans phrase*, the thesis that pleasure (and the absence of pain) is the only intrinsic good. The former is only a claim about the value of *experience*, and allows that there may be other intrinsically good things that have nothing to do with experience, such as achievement or meaningfulness. Also, since HEV is a thesis about intrinsic value, it doesn't deny that it can be good for us to have unpleasant experiences. Sometimes such experiences teach us something about the world, or indeed about ourselves, and such knowledge may be good for us. But this is merely instrumental value. Individual unpleasant experiences may also result in more pleasant experiences in the future. This is a different way they can be of instrumental value. But considered on their own, they are bad for us. Only pleasant experiences are good *as* experiences, regardless of what follows from them.

HEV easily accounts for the value of the experiences I listed above. Yet L. A. Paul explicitly denies HEV:

I take these values of experiences to be values 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 include arise from nonsensory phenomenological features of experiences, especially rich, developed experiences that embed a range of mental states, including beliefs, emotions, and desires. (XXX)

So Paul maintains that some experiences, especially “rich, developed” ones, are intrinsically good for us beyond their hedonic quality. Perhaps the claim is that the experience of performing music with friends, for example, is a valuable experience to have just in virtue of its distinctive “cognitive phenomenology”, which is different from any other experience. This, however, is a highly dubious claim. After all, it amounts to claiming that valuable experiences have nothing in common *qua* experiences apart from being valuable. Or does Paul claim that it is intrinsically good for us to have *rich and developed* experiences? To test this theory against HEV, we need to look at cases of rich and developed experiences that are not pleasant in any way. If they are *intrinsically* good for us to have, Paul’s theory has an advantage over HEV.

Alas, it is hard to think of such experiences. Suppose you go a performance of Macbeth, which you follow attentively. Plausibly, your experience is rich and developed. Is this a good experience for you to have? Well, it’s not a stretch to assume that it is *instrumentally* good for you – perhaps it yields some insight into Shakespeare or even the human condition that you wouldn’t have otherwise had. To that extent, it’s a means to something intrinsically good, perhaps even a necessary means. But is it good in itself? If it is

not in any way an *enjoyable* experience, the answer seems to be negative. After all, if you neither got anything further from the experience nor enjoyed it, what would be in it for you? Or consider the experience of being exquisitely tortured. It might be rich and developed. But unless its being rich and developed was to some extent your liking, this wouldn't make it any better. It might be less boring, and hence in one respect involve less suffering, and so hedonistically preferable, if other things were equal. But if it wasn't, being rich and developed wouldn't in itself be a redeeming feature.

In other places, Paul suggests other non-hedonic criteria for valuable experience. Consider the following passage:

Our experiences, especially new ones, are valuable, that is, we value having them, and we especially care about having experiences of different sorts. As such, experiences have values that carry weight in our decision-making. (XXX)

Here, it seems, Paul suggests that good-making features of experience include *novelty* and *variety*. This is an appealing thought. But it seems to me that the appeal is illusory. The reason is that novelty and variety are unquestionably *instrumentally* valuable features of experience, so while they are good, they are not *intrinsically* such. It's a well-established fact that for many kinds of experience, repetition reduces the hedonic quality of the experience. Watching *Groundhog Day* is a positive experience for most of us. Watching *Groundhog Day* again, and again, and again less so. We'd rather have a new kind of experience. But that's because novelty is often pleasant, and so is variety. (Although there are people, like Elvis, who prefer the predictable experience of eating a cheeseburger for lunch every day.) So while we do indeed care about having experiences of different sorts, it's because we don't want to get bored and lose in terms of pleasure. It is no doubt good, because delightful, for Frank Jackson's (1982) Mary to see red for the first time. But would it really be good for her

to be introduced to a new, slightly different shade of red (or some other color) every day for the rest of her life? Hardly – because it would hardly be an enjoyable life, although it would involve a constant stream of new and different experiences.

Paul has one more argument against HEV. She maintains that *veridical* experiences are more valuable than non-veridical ones:

I will assume that an experience has this sort of value only when it correctly represents what's in the world or it is produced in the right way. So these values are values for lived experience, where such experience is “real” or veridical. (XXX)

If this were the case, HEV would be false, since the hedonic quality of experience is independent of how it is produced or its veridicality. However, there is good reason to believe this is not the case. The argument is simple:

1. If the value of tokens of X depends solely on what they are like in respect R, then tokens A and B of X can differ in value only if A and B are not alike in respect R.
2. The intrinsic value of an experience depends solely on what it's experientially like.
3. Veridical and non-veridical experiences are experientially alike.
4. Hence, veridical and non-veridical experiences cannot differ in intrinsic value.

The first premise is a kind of supervenience thesis, which can hardly be denied (it may even be a conceptual truth). The second premise says that the intrinsic value of experiences depends only on their quality as experiences, on the what-it-is-like to have them. It doesn't deny that veridical and non-veridical experiences have different *instrumental* value. Only veridical experiences tell us something about the world, and may yield knowledge. In that sense veridical experiences are better than non-veridical ones, assuming knowledge is intrinsically or instrumentally good. But *as experiences*, considered apart from their

consequences, their value depends solely on their experiential quality.² The third premise simply points out that there is no difference between veridical and non-veridical experiences in this respect. Their intrinsic qualities are identical. So it is no surprise that their intrinsic (prudential) value must be identical.

So I don't find Paul's arguments against HEV convincing. Nevertheless, I do believe it needs to be modified for the sort of reasons that Dan Haybron has pointed out. Haybron (2001) notes that some pleasures leave us cold or fail to touch us, and thus fail to contribute to our happiness. It is plausible to me that such peripheral pleasures are not good for us, or are only marginally good. Equally importantly, Haybron argues that moods and positive emotional states, such as being calm, relaxed, or in the 'flow' contribute to our happiness over and above their hedonic quality (Haybron 2008). Some, such as Paul Dolan (2014) might add that sense of purpose or reward is an independent element of happiness or positive experience. It is not necessary here to go into detail of emotional condition theories of happiness (see Kauppinen forthcoming a), but assuming that it is apt to label the aspects of experience that contribute to positive emotion as broadly hedonic, something close to it may well be true:

Broad (Prudential) Hedonism About Experiential Value

What is intrinsically valuable about experience is its broadly hedonic quality: when it comes to experience considered merely as such, the more it directly contributes to happiness (i.e. the higher the degree to which it is happiness-constituting), the better it is for the subject to have the experience.

² It is true that Fred Feldman considers the possibility of what he calls truth-adjusted hedonism, according to which pleasure taken in a truth is more valuable than pleasure taken in a falsehood, even if there is no experiential difference (Feldman 2004, 111–114). But first, while this view denies premise 2, it is still a form of hedonism, as Feldman emphasizes: only the hedonic aspect of experiences matters to their intrinsic value, although the degree to which it matters hangs in part on veridicality. Second, and more importantly, the idea of adjusting the value of pleasure for truth seems *ad hoc* – the only motivation for doing so is avoiding counterexamples to hedonism that appeal to 'false pleasures', such as pleasure taken in the mistaken belief that one is loved and respected by others.

If Broad (Prudential) Hedonism About Experiential Value is correct, our epistemic burden is reduced when it comes to making rational choices on the basis of the experiential quality of the outcomes. We don't need to know exactly what the possible experiences are like, since the only aspect that matters for their value is their broadly hedonic quality. I will return to the implications of this in the final section.

2. The Relative Unimportance of Revelation

It is useful to divide Paul's argument in *Transformative Experience* into two parts. The first part is skeptical, and the second constructive. The skeptical argument begins with the claim that in order to make rational choices – or, as she puts it, to meet the normative standard for choice – we must assign both the probabilities and values of possible outcomes of our options on the basis of evidence. As Paul says,

If we are to meet the normative standard when we make our choices, we must be rationally justified in our assignments of values and credences to the outcomes and states of our decision problem. That is, we must assign our values and credences based on sufficient evidence. (XXX)

This is a substantive and potentially controversial thesis, since it involves rejecting the strictly subjectivist view that any preferences meeting the axioms of decision theory are a possible basis for rational choice. I am not going to question this part of Paul's argument. I am happy enough to grant that if you prefer back-breaking labor in a coalmine to a happy life of luxury and leisure, other things being equal (as far possible), it is in one sense rational for you to choose it. But I will say that *normatively significant* rational choice requires that our preferences are not arbitrary but are based on evidence about the value of the possible

outcomes. That is, if a choice's being rational is going to have a bearing on what you *should* do, the preferences that underlie it must track what is actually valuable. In this way, theory of normatively significant rational choice connects with value theory.

Given the assumption that normatively significant rational choice requires not only evidence about probability but also evidence about value, the involvement of transformative experiences calls the possibility of rational choice into question, when the value of an outcome is importantly experiential. And Paul argues that when it comes to some of the most important life choices we make, the experiential (or as she puts it, "subjective") value swamps other values. For example, she says that "Major life decisions determine our personal futures, and centrally concern what it will be like for us to experience the futures we make for ourselves and those we care about." (XXX) For example, in deciding whether to have a child or not, we (educated middle- or upper-class Westerners) naturally and rightly put aside other people's expectations, and consider what it would be like for us to be a parent. It would be *inauthentic* to make such choices on the basis of what others think. But insofar as becoming a parent is a transformative experience, we simply do not have sufficient evidence regarding what it's like to be a parent, and hence cannot make a rational choice on (what Paul regards as) the usual basis.

So goes the skeptical argument in outline. In the next section, I'll say a little bit about how it might be countered. But first, I want to examine Paul's own non-skeptical argument. For she doesn't think that rational life choices are impossible. That's because there's another value that experiences can have. Think of tasting a new kind of fruit. Beforehand, you are not in a position to know what the experience will be like. But you do know something: once you've tasted it, you *will know* what it's like. And that may be valuable knowledge. Here the epistemically transformative experience has *revelatory* value: without the experience, you would never have come to know what it is like for you to eat that kind of fruit. In this vein,

Paul appears to argue that revelatory value is a possible rational basis for making transformative life choice. For example, she says that “I’ll argue that the best response to this situation is to choose based on whether we want to discover who we’ll become” (XXX), and later that “the proposed solution is that, if you are going 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.” (XXX) Or in more detail:

When we choose to have a transformative experience, we choose to discover its intrinsic experiential nature, whether that discovery involves joy, fear, peacefulness, happiness, fulfillment, sadness, anxiety, suffering, or pleasure, or some complex mixture thereof. If we choose to have the transformative experience, we also choose to create and discover new preferences, that is, to experience the way our preferences will evolve, and often, in the process, to create and discover a new self. On the other hand, if we reject revelation, we choose the status quo, affirming our current life and lived experience. A life lived rationally and authentically, then, as each big decision is encountered, involves deciding whether or how to make a discovery about who you will become. (XXX)

It is undeniable that transformative experiences have revelatory value, as Paul defines it. The only question is whether such value suffices to make one’s choice rational in the normatively significant sense. Take, once again, the choice of whether to become a parent. If I don’t have a child, my life will go on much as before, although I can’t be quite sure what it is like to be childless when I’m older – let’s say that in my case, the utility of this choice is between 20 and 60. This means also that I’ll never find out what it would have been like to have a child,

which may have some disutility for me (although I will find out what it is to live childless into old age³). If I have a child, I will find out what it is like to be that particular child's parent (and as Paul argues, there's just no other way to find out). This is valuable information – let us stipulate that it gives me 10 utils. This has to be balanced against the disutility, of say -5, of never finding out what it is like to remain childless for the rest of my life – especially in life choices, we must bear in mind the opportunity cost of learning what it is like to choose one way.

Of course the discovery of what it is like is not the only outcome of having a child. It also means, among other things, that I will have the experience of being that particular child's parent, which, Paul assumes, may be fantastic or terrible, and make a huge difference for how the rest of my life goes. (I will later call this assumption regarding experience into question, but since becoming a parent will also have consequences of non-experiential value, it is nevertheless true that it can make a vast difference to how good my future will be.) Let us say that it will have a value or disvalue somewhere between 100 and -100 utils for me – the problem being precisely that I don't know where the experience falls on that scale.

Here is a decision matrix, ignoring other outcomes. In line with standard decision theory, the expected value of an option is the sum of the values of possible outcomes once they've been multiplied by their probability:

³ As a referee pointed out, the fact that life choice situations are typically symmetrical in this way – if you marry, you'll discover what it's like to be married, if you don't marry, you'll discover what it's like to remain unmarried (which is not going to be the same as having been unmarried until now) – means that revelatory value is not going to rationalize choice in either direction. Paul tends to write as if not choosing a new thing means that things will go on as before, so that there's no revelation to be had. Here's a representative passage: "In either case, when choosing to have a child or choosing to remain childless, if you choose rationally, you choose on the basis of whether you want to discover new experiences and preferences or whether you want to forgo such a discovery. You choose whether you want revelation, or whether you don't." (XXX) But as I've said, you'll get unpredictable new experiences either way, so this can't be the right description of the choice situation: you'll get revelation whether you want it or not!

Option	Outcomes	Values of Outcomes	Probabilities of Outcomes	Expected Value of Option
Having a child	Finding out what it is like to be the particular child's parent, not finding out what it's like to keep living without child	$10u - 5u = 5u$	1	$5u + ??$
	Having the experience of being the particular child's parent	$-100u$ to $100u$??	
Not having a child	Not finding out what it is like to be a parent, finding out what it's like not to be a parent	$-10u + 5u = -5u$	1	$-5u + ??$
	Leading a life that is unchanged in this respect	20 to 60	??	

So, taking into account the revelatory value of having a child, can I now make a rational choice about whether to have a child? No! There are too many question marks in the matrix. I still don't know whether my life will be miserable or glorious with a child, nor for that matter what it will be like if I never have one. While I may want to know what it is like to have a child, there are things I want even more, such as leading a happy life and avoiding spending the rest of my life in worry and misery. While it is rational for me to value coming to know what it is like to have a particular child, it is not rational for me to value this knowledge more than my future happiness or other prudential goods. As the matrix shows, even if I give a rather large value to coming to know what it is like to have a child, the value of revelation dwarfs in comparison to my future quality of experience, not to mention other prudential goods. Insofar as I genuinely can't give a rational estimate to what the broadly hedonic (and other prudentially significant) consequences of a choice are, it is deeply irrational for me to make the choice on the basis of the relatively minor value of coming to know what an experience is like or how my preferences will change.

What might Paul say in response? When she writes about making a choice on the basis of revelatory value, she talks about “reframing” or “reconfiguring” our choices in terms of coming to know what it’s like, leaving aside the experiential value (which she calls “subjective value” or “subjective well-being”). Here’s two typical passages:

To configure this decision to make it rational, we need to keep in mind, again, that the values of these outcomes are *not* determined by whether the experience involved is good or bad, but solely by the subjective value of the discovery of the nature of the experience, whatever it is like. (XXX)

Similarly, the decision to have a child could be understood as a decision to discover a radically new way of living with correspondingly new preferences, whether your subjective well-being increases or not. (XXX)

I agree that one could, *de facto*, make life decisions on such a basis. The problem is that doing so would not be rational *in the normatively significant sense*. Imagine someone making the choice of whether to become a vampire on the basis of wanting to stay out all night and sleep during the day. That would be a possible basis for making the choice, and it would be possible to opt for becoming a vampire in a kind of rational manner this way. But it would hardly be rational in the normatively significant sense to simply ignore the most important things that are at stake in the choice when making it (such as what it is like to be immortal, to live off people’s blood, and so on) – the kind of things that decisively matter for one’s subjective (and objective) well-being. In general, we can’t be rational in the normatively significant sense if we *ignore* the values of some of the outcomes of possible choices. (If I’m thinking about which restaurant to go to, I can’t rationally ignore the price and simply make the choice on the basis of which one serves the best food.) To be “rationally justified in our assignments of values” to options, we must take all the values of

possible outcomes of the option into account, in particular those that significantly affect our future well-being. Thus, when reframing or reconfiguring a choice means leaving significant values out of the calculation (whether they are experiential or non-experiential), it results in a choice that is not rational in the normatively significant sense that Paul herself is interested in.

So, in short, while Paul is right in that transformative experiences have revelatory value, such value is not sufficient to rationalize life choices, if their effects on the agent's subjective and objective well-being are unknown and unknowable. Unless there is some other basis for rationally assigning values to outcomes, the skeptical argument carries the day.

3. Beyond Experiential Value

In the previous section, I endorsed Paul's requirement for normatively significant rational choice: we must have justified beliefs about the value of possible outcomes as well as about their probability. I haven't called into question her claim that in the case of transformative experience, it is not possible for us to form justified beliefs about what possible outcomes are like for us, but I have rejected her own proposed solution for how to make rational life choices on the basis of revelatory value. Should we then be skeptics about the possibility of rational life choices?

No, we shouldn't, although we shouldn't expect such choices to be easy either. In this section, I will sketch an argument that gives us some reason for optimism about the possibility of rational life choices in spite of everything. The argument hangs on two main assumptions. First, there are other kinds of prudential value that are arguably more significant than experiential value. Insofar as we can reliably enough predict what our

choices mean for the realization of these non-experiential prudential values, we can after all rationally assign values to outcomes even if they involve transformative experience. Second, while in the case of transformative choice, we can't predict exactly what our experiences will be like, it turns out not to matter so much. This is because precisely when it is hard to know what our life will be like, it is likely that there is no dramatic difference in experiential value between the possible outcomes in the long term. This strengthens the case for making the choice on the basis of non-experiential values.

First, then, I will offer a brief sketch of why experiential value is relatively unimportant (I give a fuller account elsewhere). There are *non-experiential* prudential goods – things that are good for me regardless of the quality of my experience. I take it that this is an overwhelmingly plausible assumption on the face of it. The most famous argument for it is, of course, Robert Nozick's (1974) Experience Machine thought experiment. There are many ways to construe it, but for my purposes, the essential point is that a person who is only concerned with her own good would be better off actually leading the life of her dreams – such as being a Nobel Prize-winning rock star and Wimbledon champion – than having a perfect machine-generated illusion of leading the same life. The thought experiment is silent on just why this axiological fact obtains. Nozick's own suggestion – that being in touch with reality matters for its own sake (1974, 42) – isn't particularly plausible. There are, after all, many things that are absent in the machine scenario as a result of not being in touch with reality. For example, there are no significant achievements and no significant relationships with actual other individuals, and little autonomy or knowledge. Consequently, life inside the experience machine has very little meaning (Kauppinen 2012, Metz 2013).

All these things are candidates for non-experiential intrinsic prudential goods. When it comes to non-experiential value, Objective List theorists mention things like achievement, friendship, and self-respect as things that are intrinsically valuable for us to have (Fletcher

2013). Perfectionists talk about the development and exercise of human capacities, such as practical and theoretical reason, and emotional and physical skills (Kraut 2007). I have recently argued that a *narrativist* account of non-experiential prudential value captures the truth in both of these accounts, since prudentially good life histories involve successful pursuit of objectively valuable goals in a way that makes intelligent use of our capacities and builds on our past (Kauppinen 2012, forthcoming b). For my purposes here, any of these answers would do. What matters is that outcomes of our choices have value for us that is independent of our possibly unpredictable experience of them.

Suppose, for example, that other things being equal, it is better for me to create something of higher aesthetic value than something of lower aesthetic value – that artistic achievement is intrinsically good for me. The prudential value of producing great art isn't reducible to my own *experience* of doing so. Maybe I can't know what it's like to create a truly great painting before I've done so. Maybe it doesn't feel that great. But it may nevertheless be good for me to succeed in such a project. I will not have wasted my time, but will have drawn on my unique history and abilities to create something that no one else could have. That this is a valuable outcome is something I could have known beforehand. And indeed, people do. Presumably Gauguin didn't know what it would be like for him to leave his family and move to Tahiti. Nor could he have known that he would succeed in producing art of great value. But he was in a position to know that it is better for him to become a great artist than to remain a mediocre one, and perhaps in a position to form a rational estimate that he was more likely to become a great artist if he left his family than if he stayed in France. In any case, the decision problem wasn't about which outcome is better and which worse for him. It was about which action is more likely to bring about which outcome.

Factual uncertainty, obviously, is always going to be a problem with life choices. A theory that implied it is *de facto* easy to make rational life choices would be implausible. I can't know for sure what happens when I marry Gary. I won't be completely in the dark, if I know him (and myself): I've got evidence to support forming credences regarding how our relationship might develop and what commitment would mean for my other projects. I'm in a better position to assign values to possible outcomes. It will be good for me to stick with someone who has seen me at my worst and stuck with me. It will be good for me to commit to a relationship that benefits from what I've been through in the past. It is good if I'm in a relationship that nourishes projects that do some real good beyond the confines of my own life: for example, I should be with someone who supports me in becoming a better teacher and researcher, and inspires me to do right by strangers who need my assistance. I will say that when my choice is explicitly or implicitly guided by this kind of consideration (in addition, obviously, to assignments of choice-dependent probabilities to outcomes), it is a *story-regarding* one. It should be clear that story-regarding choices are *authentic* in the sense that Paul deploys – they involve thinking about “who you really are and what you really want from life” and taking “charge of your own destiny” (XXX) rather than letting the preferences, values, or even needs of others determine what we do. So they can offer the kind of basis for rational life choices that Paul herself accepts, and not some ersatz substitute.

But, Paul might object, if we make story-regarding choices, aren't we guilty of irrationally ignoring what matters most about our life choices, namely what it will be like for us to lead a particular kind of life? (This is parallel to my own complaint against making choices on the basis of revelatory value.) I think there's two reasons why this potential objection is weak. First, when it comes to determining the overall prudential value of an option, especially in the case of life choices, non-experiential values are typically weightier than experiential values. I admit that this is not easy to show, in part because values of, say,

achievement and pleasure are plausibly incommensurable. But it is something that is manifest in people's actual choices. Faced with having to choose between integrity, commitment, friendship, meaning, or achievement, on the one hand, and happiness on the other, we frequently go with the former option. Not everyone and not always, to be sure. But this brings us back to Mill's Socrates and the swine. Mill himself, problematically, frames the distinction in terms of higher and lower pleasures (1863, 11–17). But the basic point he's making – that those who have experience of, say, artistic achievement or the use of “higher faculties”, prefer a life that involves such goods to a life that lacks them, even if the latter holds more happiness for them – still holds. Of course, we'd rather have good experiences along with non-experiential goods – and indeed, experience suggests we're more likely than not to feel good when we enjoy a thriving friendship or succeed in an academic endeavor, for example. But we can rationally take the risk of bad experiences, if we thereby gain in some significant non-experiential goods. That's what happens when we make story-regarding choices in ignorance of what the outcomes will be like for us. I thus deny Paul's claim, already quoted above, that major life decisions “centrally concern what it will be like for us to experience the futures we make for ourselves and those we care about.” (XXX) The quality of our future experience is just one consideration, and frequently not the most important one.

The second reason why we shouldn't worry too much about our ignorance of future experience is that in the long run, the choices we make are unlikely to matter too much to the quality of our experience, at least when the effect is genuinely unpredictable. This claim is supported by empirical psychology. I argued in the first section in favor of Broad Hedonism About Experiential Value – roughly, experiences are good for us *qua* experiences insofar as they directly contribute to our happiness (insofar as they are happiness-constituting). I also observed that this simplifies our epistemic situation: in order to form rational estimates of

experiential value, we don't need to know exactly what an outcome is like for us, but just its broadly hedonic quality. This task is arguably easier – even if I have only the remotest idea of what it's like to eat durian fruit, I do know that it won't be as horrible as having a tooth pulled out, nor as enjoyable as winning a Nobel prize. Still, it is difficult. Psychological research on what is known as 'affective forecasting' suggests that people are quite bad at predicting what, how intense, and how long-lasting their affective responses are in various possible contingencies (Wilson and Gilbert 2003). Even in the case of non-transformative experience, we misconstrue future events, frame them misleadingly, have poor recall of past experiences, rely on bad but culturally prevalent theories, allow our current experience to bias our expectations, focus narrowly on just one aspect of the event, are ignorant of our psychological defense mechanisms, and so on. Clearly, we're not great judges of broadly hedonic value.

However, according to Timothy Wilson and Daniel Gilbert, the “most prevalent error” in affective forecasting is *impact bias*, whereby “people overestimate the impact of future events on their emotional reactions” (Wilson and Gilbert 2003, 353). Study after study has shown that the impact of future events and changes in our life on our affective condition is much smaller and more short-lived than we think. People expect that they'll be unhappy if they fail to get a job, break up with their partner, fail to get tenure, lose a limb, or, perhaps most pertinently for our purposes, have a child with Down's syndrome. But in fact, after a period of adjustment that is much shorter than most people expect, their affective state typically returns to its ordinary level, or close to it.

To be sure, there are some circumstances people don't tend to adjust to. For example, it is, unsurprisingly, tough to be the primary caregiver to a severely disabled child, in particular without family and community support (Cummins 2001). But this is not a problem for the present argument, since it is not unpredictable that such outcomes are low in

experiential value (even if we can't know exactly what it is like to take care of a severely autistic child, say, before we've done so). If we know all the facts about living with an abusive spouse, say, apart from what we can only learn by actually leading such a life, we already know enough to know that it's bad for us. Transformative experiences are not a barrier for rationally estimating the value of such outcomes. These outcomes only pose the traditional challenge to any rational decision-making: it can be hard to form justified beliefs about their likelihood – it's can be hard to find out whether a child will turn out to be severely disabled or whether a partner will turn out to be abusive.

Here, then, is a brief argument in favour of thinking that we can make rational life choices, even if we accept that they involve transformative experiences, and deny that revelatory value suffices to rationalize choice in the normatively significant sense:

1. Rational choice in the normatively significant sense requires justified belief about the relative values of outcomes and their probability.
2. We can (often) form justified beliefs about the narrative value of outcomes, regardless of whether they involve transformative experiences.
3. We can (often) form justified beliefs about the probability of possible narrative outcomes, given our choices.
4. So, we can (often) make life choices that are rational in the normatively significant sense insofar as they are story-regarding. (1, 2, 3)
5. The narrative value of possible futures typically trumps experiential value in the case of life choices, especially since life choices are unlikely to make a lasting difference to experiential value (except in exceptional and predictable circumstances)
6. So, it is typically prudentially rational in the normatively significant sense to make life choices that are story-regarding rather than experience-regarding. (4, 5)

I don't want to pretend that the conclusion is stronger than it is. We can't always reliably estimate narrative value, or what kind of turns our life history will take, given a choice. And in atypical circumstances, life choices may have both dramatic and unpredictable lasting impact on our experience. In such rare cases, the skeptical part of Paul's argument remains unanswerable.

4. Conclusion

Life choices are difficult. In part, they are difficult for us because we are unable to estimate the difference they make to our future experience. But the quality of our experience is not the only thing that is at stake, nor is it the most important consideration, even if we restrict ourselves to self-interested choices. So when we decide which job to take or what kind of family to have if any, it is rational for us to focus on the *non-experiential* consequences of our choices. One relatively minor consequence is that we will discover what it is like for us to live in a certain way (while never finding out what it would have been like, had we chosen the other way). But there are far more important values at stake. Which outcome will put us in a better position to achieve something genuinely valuable? Which choice involves more intelligent use of our abilities? What do the outcomes mean for our existing commitments? Which outcome would better build on our past efforts or redeem failures? When we make the decision on the basis of solid evidence regarding the likely consequences of our choice to such non-experiential sources of value, it has a good chance of being both authentic and rational in the normatively significant sense, especially since the odds are the our choice won't have a dramatic effect on the overall quality of our experiences. Indeed, it seems likely that insofar as there are lasting effects on experience, they roughly track the trajectory of non-experiential value – when we succeed at finding meaningful work, building a good personal relationship, or creating a work of art, realizing the non-experientially valuable

outcome is likely to have a positive effect on experience as well. So while positive experiences are genuinely valuable for us, we are better off focusing on non-experiential values, especially when it comes to life choices like deciding whether to have a child.⁴

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