Should we strive for rationality?*

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In this paper, I will be reading and invoking Paul's decision theory from "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting" in an analysis of McKinnon's[1] "Trans*formative Experiences," which argues that Paul's model does not apply to gender transition. I will explain why I agree with McKinnon, and finally, I will attempt to offer a model for making transformative decisions that is compatible with Paul's decision theory.

1 Paul

Paul's paper[2] is a fascinating one. Paul begins with a *Scenario* that many prospective parents experience: a couple sits down and talks about whether or not they want to have a child. Paul's *Scenario* boils down to two choices, for (they decide to have a child) and against (they decide to remain childless). She mentions that many parents decide to have children because they feel that "having a child will help them to live a fuller, happier, and somehow more complete life."

Section 2 of the paper begins to describe Paul's normative decision theory: "[if] we can glean approximate values for our outcomes and apply the right decision theoretic rules, we can conform to the ordinary standard for rational decision-making." In other words, for Paul, we try as we can to make rational decisions with whatever information we have. The rest of the section focuses on trying to simplify and boil down Paul's *Scenario* into a "set of fine-grained, exclusive and exhaustive propositions."

Paul now invokes Frank Jackson's Mary the Neuroscientist thought experiment, where a brilliant scientist named Mary has been living her entire life inside a black-and-white box, unable to

1. As of writing, Veronica Ivy has changed her name from Rachel McKinnon, but since her work was published under the former name, I will use the former name throughout this paper.

2. Paul 2015.

experience any form of color. She knows what it should be like to see color, based on her understanding of how the eye sees color, how the brain processes color, and so on. But for Paul, Mary has never had the *epistemically transformative experience* of actually seeing color, and such, Mary is in an *epistemically impoverished state.* Mary can not know exactly what it is or will be like to experience the color red. And such, for Paul, someone trying to decide whether or not to have a child is in a similar impoverished position, "because [they] do not know what it will be like to have a child of [their] very own.[3]

Paul also shows that such an epistemically transformative experience as having a child is additionally *personally transformative*, because it may change "what it is like to be you." She lists reasons why having a child can be both epistemically and personally transformative, and then begins to show why such a choice presented in *Scenario* can not be made rationally. It is fair to say that rational decisions can not be made from incomplete information. In a normative decision model, choices are made from incomplete information. Since it is impossible for Mary or a prospective parent to "rationally determine the values of the relevant outcomes," for Paul, it is not possible to make a rational decision about such a transformative experience. Paul stresses many times that it is "impossible" to make a rational choice. I agree, but I wonder why there is such a focus on being rational and making rational decisions all the time.

2   McKinnon

This paper[4] is "composed of two related projects, tied together by considering trans experiences of gender transition viz. transformative experiences." For the purposes of my paper, however, I only want to focus on McKinnon's disagreement with Paul. McKinnon explains Paul's account of transformative experiences. She argues that the prospect of undergoing a gender transition is the paradigmatic example of a transformative experience, due to how much of daily life is gendered.

McKinnon's fundamental disagreement is that "for many trans people contemplating gender transition, they know the expected utility of not transitioning."[5] McKinnon adapts Paul's *Scenario* to gender transition as such: two choice are presented, to transition or not to transition, and two outcomes from each choice exist, happiness or unhappiness, for a grand total of four outcomes: 'transition-happy', 'transition-unhappy', 'not transition-happy', and 'not transition-unhappy'.

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3. I prefer to use they/them pronouns when making examples. I have portrayed Paul's writing to the same effect, but with more inclusive language.

4. McKinnon 2015.

5. In her paper, McKinnon uses two different terms to refer to the trans* community: "trans" to refer to transsexual individuals, or those who have or want gender-affirming surgery, and "trans*" to refer to the broad spectrum of trans people. While I do not personally agree with this emerging convention, I will use it for the purposes of this paper.

McKinnon points to the distressing rate of trans* suicide. "In a number of studies, the percentage of trans* people who have attempted suicide is 41%. Trans* people can be faced with an "all-consuming" need to begin transition. And such, for many trans* people, the 'not transition-happy' outcome is effectively impossible.

I end my summary with an important example explained by McKinnon, quoted in full: "Suppose I have to place a bet with my life. I know I'll lose if I bet on red. But I have an unknown non-zero chance of winning some unknown amount by betting on black. If I care about winning, the only rational choice is to bet on black. So I should do that, according to normative decision theory. The same is true for many trans people contemplating transition."

3 The Illusion of Choice

I agree with McKinnon to an extent. While it is possible for someone to look into the future and imagine themself in the same emotional and physical state as they currently inhabit, Paul is right that it is impossible for someone to see 18 years down the road and imagine themeslf without a child, and such, it is impossible to see far into the future having not transitioned. Many trans* people in fact report to not even be able to conceptulalize life past the present, within the gender that they themselves, as well as society, ascribe to them.

This impossibility can be seen as an illusion of choice. For example, under the current neoliberal economic system existing in most western countries, every person is offered a choice of whether or not to work, to hold a job. However, if one choses not to hold a job, they face poverty, homelessness, starvation, and in extreme cases, death. This can be simplified and shown as a 'work-or-die' existence. If we apply this rationale to the prospect of transitioning, trans* people could be faced with the false choice of 'transition-or-die', or 'transition-or-stagnate'.[6]

Another false choice is created by inequality. Many trans* people face prohibitively expensive surgeries, or doctor's appointments likely not covered by insurance to acquire hormone replacement therapy. They also face abuse or ignorance from peers or family members. In these cases, the choice not to transition has been made for them.

I also argue that one can not rationally choose to die. This leads me to agree with Paul, in that one can not rationally choose to transition (medically or otherwise), and one can not rationally choose to die. One can also not physically choose to transition, when prohibited by costs or otherwise.

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6. As McKinnon stated, this does not include all trans* people, but, for my purposes, it is a significant enough amount to make this point.

4　The Cult of Rationality

As Paul and I have shown, it is impossible to make rational decisions about transformative experiences. However, essentially, "so what?" So what if we as human beings can not be perfectly rational in every decision? Since the Enlightenment, where reason and empiricism flourished, humanity has been obsessed with maximising the pleasure and minimizing the pain through careful planning and decisions. Rationality was also viewed as superior because it was in opposition to emotional reactions to stimuli by women and children. But since it is impossible to be perfect in this regard, why even strive for perfection?

I do not mean to appear negative in this quandary. Instead, I propose a virtuous approach where rationality is the upper vice and emotionality is the lower. Somewhere between these seems like the way towards the good life. Life is all about responding to events and stimuli that are surprising, unwanted, exciting, upsetting, tragic, and blissful. Rationality can only get a decision-maker so far, and where it struggles, emotionality back it up.

Choices could still be made taking reason into account. As before, one faced with a decision would approximate values for each outcome. But they would also listen to what their heart says about the outcome. In deciding to transition, if someone was equally capable of either outcome, rather, they had the financial, emotional, and social stability to undergo transition, they would be able to do what "feels" the most right.[7] This method of decision making flourishes in a more equitable society, one without artificial boundaries in the way of the path to child-rearing, transitioning, or even college. Armed with an idealistic way of making decisions, the question remains: what is to be done to allow everyone to take advantage of the method?

References

McKinnon, Rachel. 2015. "Trans*formative Experiences." *Res Philosophica* 92 (2): 419–440. ISSN: 21689105, accessed April 16, 2019. https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2015.92.2.12.

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7. I am aware that personal anecdotes do not have a place in philosophical writings, but if I may: this is quite the situation I was in when I realized I was trans*. Being able to make the decision with my heart and my head felt correct, even if I was not consciously using this model.