

# Big Decisions, Transformative Choices, and Self-Creation (Part 1)

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## The Problem of Big, Transformative Decisions

*Question:* Can decision theory offer us sensible account of how to make “big”, “transformative” decisions? (That is, ones that are “life-altering”?)

*Examples:* attending college, having children, getting married, choosing a career, emigrating, receiving a cochlear implant, becoming a vampire, etc. (Can you think of any others?)

*Problem:* Big, transformative decisions can be expected to occasion substantial changes in one’s preferences. The decision-maker lacks a single, stable preference-ordering.

## Edna Ullmann-Margalit on Big Decisions

1. Ullmann-Margalit worries that, when a decision transforms one’s core preferences, there is no *neutral* vantage point from which to evaluate the decision. And that, therefore, it’s not possible to assess the rationality of such choices.

New Person is now, by hypothesis, a transformed person. Opting transforms the sets of one’s core beliefs and desires. A significant personality shift takes place in our opter, a shift that alters his cognitive as well as evaluative systems. New Person’s new sets of beliefs and desires may well be internally consistent but the point about the transformation is that inconsistency now exists between New Person’s system of beliefs and desires, taken as a whole, and Old Person’s system taken as a whole. I am not questioning his ability to actually make a choice, or his ability subsequently to assess himself as happy (or unhappy) with his choice. The question I am raising is whether it is possible to assess the rationality of his choice, given that this choice straddles two dis-continuous personalities with two different rationality bases. (2006: 167)

2. The same worry arises for one’s “second-order” preferences because transformative choices can transform them as well.

I was told of a person who hesitated to have children because he did not want to become the “boring type” that all his friends became after they had children. Finally, he did decide to have a child and, with time, he did adopt the boring characteristics of his parent friends—but he was happy! I suppose second order preferences are crucial to the way we are to make sense of this story. As Old Person, he did not approve of the person he knew he would become

What is meant by “decision theory”? Any view that holds that what it’s rational for someone to do primarily depends on, for all the available alternatives, (i) each outcome’s likelihood of occurring, and (ii) one’s preferences over those outcomes.

It’s sometimes said that there are two different roles ‘rationality’ plays:

1. A third-personal, *evaluative* role.  
(We might ask of someone, who decided to  $\phi$ , whether her decision to do so was a rational one.)
2. A first-personal, *action-guiding* role.  
(We might ask ourselves, when deliberating about whether or not to  $\phi$ , whether we rationally should.)

Edna Ullmann-Margalit focuses on the former, while Laurie Paul focuses on the latter.

Second-order attitudes are attitudes about one’s first-order attitudes. So, your second-order preferences are the preferences you have over your own (first-order) preferences.

*Example:* You desire a cigarette, but you wish you didn’t; you prefer being idle to being active, but you wish (for the sake of your health) that you didn’t; you prefer push-pin to poetry, but long to be more cultured; etc. (Can you think of other examples?)

if he has children: his preferences were to not have New Person's preferences. As New Person, however, not only did he acquire the predicted new set of preferences, he also seems to have approved of himself having them. How are we to assess the question whether he opted 'right'? (167, n. 10)

3. *Conclusion*: Big decisions are neither rational nor irrational—they are *arational*.

### *Laurie Paul on Transformative Choice*

1. Paul thinks that transformative choices raise two (distinct, but related) worries for rational decision-making:
  - (1) *Epistemically Transformative*: The choice involves having an experience that you cannot, in advance, know *what it is like* to have. If outcomes of my choice involve epistemically transformative experiences, how can I assign them *utilities* (without, first, undergoing them)? And, if I can't assign those outcomes utilities, I cannot rationally choose between my options.
  - (2) *Personally Transformative*: The choice involves changing what you value and to what extent. If I will evaluate the outcomes of my decision differently depending on what I decide, what utilities should I assign those outcomes?
2. *Response to (1)*: Lots of decisions involve having to make choices without *full* information. Can't you just appeal to other sources of information? Research? Anecdotal evidence from friends?

Paul worries that, while maybe you can do this, your choices then lack *authenticity*:

Unless robots have taken over the world when humans weren't looking, for many of us, this is an untenable way to approach choices involving our personal goals, hopes, projects, and dreams. In other words, in today's society, when making important personal choices, we want to consult our own, personal preferences and to reflect on what we want our future lives to be like as part of assigning values to outcomes. It is simply unacceptable to be expected to give up this sort of personal autonomy in order to make decisions about how one wants to live one's life. (87)

Does that worry you, too?

*Epistemically transformative experiences* teach you something about the *phenomenal character* of that experience which can only be learned by having an experience of that kind.