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Transformative Experiences, Incommensurability and Rational Choice²

Abstract: It has been suggested that some experiences are transformative; they radically change a person, their understanding of and way of being in the world (cf. Paul 2014). What this means for people who face choices in which they know that they will go through a transformative experience is a complicated matter. How can choice options in such situations be compared and ranked? What could it be to act rationally in such situations? In this paper, I will argue that when individuals face choices that involve predictable transformative experiences, we should sometimes understand that as individuals facing options that are incommensurable but that it might still be possible for them to make a rational choice.

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1. Transformative, prudential choice

Some experiences are said to be “transformative”. In a deep and significant sense, they change who we are; they change our understanding of the world, what we value, and how we act. What specific experience transforms a specific person in this way will likely depend on the individual, but examples that are often discussed in the literature on transformative experiences are things like religious epiphanies, having children, experiencing traumas, and the acquirement of new capacities such as hearing and seeing (see, e.g., Chan 2023). A rationalist, egoist atheist who experiences a religious epiphany and becomes deeply convinced of the existence of the Christian God and the importance of Jesus’s love message gets transformed in how they understand the world around them, what they value, and how they act (cf. De Cruz 2018). Having children is said to fundamentally change many people in similar ways: their understanding of the world changes, their preferences and values change, as does their behavior towards others (Paul 2014, 2015). It has been suggested that certain traumas can fundamentally change a person. Certain forms of torture, for instance, seem to change the core of what a person is (cf. Scarry 1987; Rorty 1989). When Winston Smith, in *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, after significant torture, betrays the person he loves (Julia) and accepts to genuinely believe that two plus two equals five, he is so deeply and significantly transformed that he understands the world in a completely new way, develops completely different values, and interacts with the oppressive society he lives in in a different way. Providing cochlear implants to someone who was born deaf will change how they understand the world, what they value, and how they interact with others (cf. Chan 2023).

The possibility of transformative experiences raises a wide range of questions. What do they mean for someone’s personal identity? Can these experiences be good/bad? Is it in some ways wrong (because autonomy-violating) to intentionally expose others to them? Can a person understand the effects of a transformative experience before going through it? How should we understand choice situations that involve transformative experiences? Do transformative experiences challenge the possibility of rational choice? I am, in this paper, interested in a very narrow question: how should we understand the implications of predictable transformative experiences for choice situations where individuals make choices for themselves?

Sometimes, transformative experiences just come to people, sometimes they are imposed upon them, but sometimes, a transformative experience can be intentionally *chosen* by the person who gets to experience it. Religious epiphanies might be hard to intentionally choose to experience, and few people choose to be tortured,³ but many

³ There are, however, examples of those who *do* choose to be tortured, see, e.g., Hitchens 2008.

if not most people who have children choose to have them, and medical interventions that lead to potentially transformative experience require informed consent and thereby choice (at least for adults). If these experiences really are transformative in the sense that they change how one understands the world, what one values, and how one interacts with others, how should we understand these choices? Can they be rational?

Choices are made based on the understanding the decisionmaker has of the choice situation and the various options. This means that there are two possibilities when choice situations involve transformative experiences. Firstly, it is perfectly possible that an agent faces a choice situation that where an option can cause a transformative experience without understanding or expecting that there will be a transformative experience involved. A person can make a decision to have a child and expect not to change at all as a result of it but then discover that having a child radically changes how they understand the world, what they value, and how they interact with others. Similarly, a person can choose to go through with a medical procedure that fundamentally changes who they are without understanding or predicting that a transformative change will occur.⁴ Secondly, an agent can face a choice situation that involves a transformative experience and also understand and predict that if they make a certain choice, they will become radically changed.

Although the first possibility is interesting and merits analysis, I will focus on the second possibility in this paper. How should we understand choice situations where an agent can make a choice that will radically change who they are in terms of how they understand the world, what they value and how they interact with others, and where the agent understands and expects this to happen? Is it possible for agents to make rational choices in such situations?

2. Transformative experiences and incommensurability

How do two options, P and Q, relate to each other when an agent, A, understands and predicts that they will go through a transformative experience, T, if they choose one option but not the other? Transformative experiences are said to change an agent's understanding of the world, what they value and their way of acting in the world. This means that there is a range of possibilities of how the agent will judge the situation, reflecting a certain dimension of degree or scope of the transformation:

⁴ This possibility raises hard questions for what informed consent means in choice situations that involve transformative experiences.

1. A deems P to be better than Q before experiencing T, but predicts that they will judge Q to be better than P after experiencing T because A expects to get some insight, or different understanding of the world, if they experience T.
2. A deems P to be better than Q before experiencing T, but predicts that they will judge Q to be better than P after experiencing T because A expects that their values and preferences will change if they experience T.
3. A deems P to be better than Q before experiencing T, but predicts that they will judge Q to be better than P after experiencing T because A expects that there will be a change in their way of acting in the world so that the way in which their way of ranking options based on their values and knowledge changes.
4. 1 & 2
5. 1 & 3
6. 2 & 3
7. 1, 2 & 3

Can one speak about there being a *general* comparative relation between P and Q under any of these possibilities for A? What is the general comparative relation between P and Q (for A) when any of the above obtains? If only 1 is true, it seems reasonable for A to infer that Q is better than P, generally speaking (even if A cannot fully understand why before they have experienced T). If any of the other, 2-7, is true, the situation is more complicated. In those circumstances, A knows or predicts that they favor P only as long as they do not make T happen, but that they will favor Q if they make T happen, and they know or predict that this is not merely a matter of learning something new about P and/or Q. How do P and Q relate to each other in such circumstances? I will argue that although one can sometimes generate general comparisons also when some of 2-7 is true, in some of these cases, we should recognize that P and Q are incommensurable in the sense that none of the conventional comparative relations determinately hold between them (cf. Andersson & Herlitz 2022).

To explore how P and Q relate to each other, it is useful to recognize that comparisons are never made *simpliciter*. When we compare options such as P and Q, we compare them *with respect to something* (even if this is not always explicated). Following Ruth Chang, I will call that something with respect to which one makes a comparison the *covering consideration* (Chang 1997). A problem when one attempts to compare P and Q is that from the perspective of what is in A's interest, there seems to be two different relevant covering considerations: the covering consideration that is grounded in A and their properties *before they experience T*, and the covering consideration

grounded in A and their properties *after they experience T*. When one applies one of the covering consideration, P is better than Q, while Q is better than P when one applies the other covering consideration. If this was only due to A learning something and acquiring new knowledge if they experience T, it seems reasonable to accept that the covering consideration that is grounded in A and their properties after they experience T is the only relevant one (it is an updated, better version of the other covering consideration). However, if it is not merely a matter of A learning something, *both* covering considerations seem relevant.

How could one establish a general comparison when there are several different relevant covering considerations? On purely formal grounds, there are a couple of obvious ways in which one can use several covering considerations to make a general comparison:

Unanimity: x is better than y if all relevant covering considerations establish that x is better than y, x is equally as good as y if all relevant covering considerations establish that x is equally as good as y, and x is worse than y if all relevant covering considerations establish that x is worse than y.

Unanimity is the most demanding formal condition that could be used in this context. Essentially, it entails that a general comparison is only when there are several relevant covering considerations and all relevant covering considerations are in agreement.

Strong dominance: x is better than y if some relevant covering consideration establishes that x is better than y and all relevant covering considerations establish that x is at least as good as y, x is equally as good as y if all relevant covering considerations establish that x is equally as good as y, and x is worse than y if some relevant covering consideration establishes that x is worse than y and all relevant covering considerations establish that x is at least as bad as y.

Strong dominance is slightly weaker than unanimity. It entails that a general comparison is possible when there are several relevant covering considerations and all relevant covering considerations are in agreement, but it also entails that a better-than-relation can be established when one relevant covering consideration entails a better-than relation and all others an equally-as-good-as relation.

Weak dominance: x is better than y if some relevant covering considerations establishes that x is better than y and all relevant covering considerations establish that x is not worse than y, x is equally as good as y if some relevant covering consideration establishes that x is equally as good as y and all relevant

covering considerations establish that neither is worse than the other, and x is worse than y if some relevant covering consideration establishes that x is worse than y and all relevant covering considerations establish that x is not better than y .

Weak dominance is slightly weaker than strong dominance. The difference between the two is that according to weak dominance, a better-than relation can be established also when one relevant covering consideration entails a better-than relation, and another relevant covering comparison establishes that the options are incomparable. And similarly for equally-as-good-as and worse-than relations.

Invoking unanimity, strong dominance or weak dominance can sometimes help one make comparisons when there are several relevant covering considerations. However, invoking formal conditions like these have limited use for the more problematic cases. When the relevant covering considerations generate conflicting rankings of options, these formal conditions cannot establish that any conventional comparative relation holds between the options (somewhat depending on interpretation, they might entail that the options are incomparable). If any of 2-7 above is true, there are, of course, conflicting rankings.

Krister Bykvist has proposed an approach that can be used for cases that involve transformative experiences (and preference changes more broadly) where there are two relevant covering considerations that generate conflicting rankings. He calls it *diagonalism*:

Diagonalism: Let each covering consideration establish a value for each outcome and maximize the value that would be obtained if a certain choice was made (Bykvist 2024).

The idea is that one compares the value that the different options have with respect to the different covering considerations in a “diagonal” way, reflecting what would be the case if different choices were made. The following table illustrates the idea:

Table 1. Diagonalism

	P	Q
Covering consideration before T	α	β
Covering consideration after T	γ	δ

Here, P and Q are ascribed one set of values, α and β , based on the covering consideration that is grounded in A and their properties before they experience T, and a different set of values, γ and δ , based on the covering consideration that is grounded in A and their properties after they experience T. If choosing Q is what leads to the

transformative experience, T, then we can rank P and Q by comparing α and δ . After all, if P is chosen, there will be no transformative experience and α would be obtained, while if Q is chosen, there will be a transformative experience and δ would be obtained. Thus:

If $\alpha < \delta$, then Q is better than P

If $\alpha > \delta$, then Q is worse than P

If $\alpha = \delta$, then P is equally as good as Q

Similarly, if choosing P is what leads to the transformative experience, T, then we can rank P and Q by comparing γ and β . Thus:

If $\gamma < \beta$, then Q is better than P

If $\gamma > \beta$, then Q is worse than P

If $\gamma = \beta$, then P is equally as good as Q

Regardless of what choice actualizes a transformative experience, we make a diagonal comparison of the values in the table. What is important to note here is that even if the different relevant covering considerations generate conflicting rankings, diagonalism can establish a unique ranking. $\alpha > \beta$ and $\gamma < \delta$ is compatible with $\alpha < \delta$.

Here is a more concrete illustration of the idea: If Anna who does not have a child and does not want to have a child in her current state ascribes being childless (P) value 5 (α) and having a child value 4 (β), but predicts that if she were to have a child, she would prefer to have a child and would ascribe being childless value 3 (γ) and having a child value 6 (δ), then having a child is better than not having a child for her, because $6 > 5$.

Bykvist provides us with a neat way of making comparisons when two different covering considerations are relevant to the comparison. However, his approach only works given certain quite demanding conditions. First, the approach only works if we can establish values for each box in the table. That might not be possible in the case of transformative experiences. Second, the approach assumes that the values in the boxes are ordinally comparable so that an at-least-as-great-as relation holds between each pair of values. Bykvist exemplifies his approach using natural numbers to describe the values which makes it easy to compare them (an at-least-as-great-as relation holds between all pairs of natural numbers), but the underlying values (as opposed to the numbers) can be very different in kind and it is questionable whether natural numbers can always accurately represent the values. The value for a deaf person of

being part of the deaf community is very different from the value for a hearing person of the social relations enabled by hearing. Does it make sense to try to represent these values on a unique scale? The value for a childless person of fulfilling a dream that is incompatible with parenthood is very different from the value for a parent of seeing their child achieve their dreams. Does it make sense to try to represent those values on a unique scale?

Of course, Bykvist's approach does not require that all values can be represented on a unique scale. What is needed for the approach to be applicable is only that all values can be ranked with the conventional comparative relations greater than, lesser than, and as great as, which is a significantly weaker condition. However, I think also this condition fails to hold in some choice situations that involve transformative experiences and where there are several relevant covering considerations.

What should we say about cases in which one option is better than the other in one special way if it is chosen and the other options is better in a different special way if that is chosen? In her outline of when options (goods) are incommensurable (i.e., neither of the option is determinately better than the other, but they are not determinately equally as good either), Elizabeth Anderson lists the following conditions:

1. The goods in question meet the standards measured by the scale in very different ways.
2. There are no gross differences in the degree to which each good exemplifies its own way of meeting the standards.
3. Meeting the standard in one way is not categorically superior to meeting it the other way. (Anderson 1993: 55)

Assuming that there is an unspecified all-things-considered covering consideration that we can call "the scale", P and Q can meet the standards measured by this scale in very different ways if any of 2-7 is true. Being part of a loving tightknit community is a very different way of leading a good life than enjoying the social relations and opportunities provided by hearing. Leading a life full of freedom and pursuit of individual interests is a very different way of leading a fulfilling life than leading a life focusing on raising children and nourishing a loving family. There is no gross difference in the degree to which each of these lifestyles might exemplify its own way of meeting the standards. And neither way of life seems categorically superior to the other. The conditions for when incommensurability obtains between options seem present when one compares P and Q and either of 2-7 is true.

Consider also the so-called "mark of incommensurability" which is typically seen as a general indication of when two options are incommensurable (cf. Andersson & Herlitz 2021):

The mark of incommensurability: “Two valuable [options] are incommensurable if (1) neither is better than the other, and (2) there is (or could be) another option which is better than one but not the other” (Raz 1986: 325)

Note that the option that is better than one option but not the other can be very slightly better. It can be a matter of a very small sweetening (cf. Andersson & Herlitz 2021).

The valuation of P and Q with the different relevant covering considerations might well bear the mark of incommensurability. Following Bykvist, assume that we are able to ascribe values in a table like this, and assume that it makes sense to make diagonal comparisons to establish how P and Q relate to each other all things considered:

Table 2

	P	Q
Covering consideration before T	α	β
Covering consideration after T	γ	δ

Contra Bykvist, let us not *assume* that the values are ordinally comparable so that an at-least-as-great-as relation always holds between two values. The question of whether incommensurability is possible in this context is a matter of whether this assumption makes sense.

Now, assume that choosing Q means going through a transformative experience so that the important comparison is the one between α and δ . Assume further that it is false that $\alpha < \delta$ and also false that $\alpha > \delta$. In other words, the value of P before T is not greater than the value of Q after T. And the value of Q after T is not greater than the value of P before T. If incommensurability was not possible, that assumption would entail that $\alpha = \delta$, which according to diagonalism means that P and Q are equally good. However, it seems possible to slightly increase the value of either P or Q, and generate α_+ or δ_+ , such that the value of α_+ or δ_+ is not greater than δ or α . That is incompatible with the idea that P and Q are equally good (cf. Herlitz 2024).

This rather abstract argument can be illustrated in various ways. Consider again someone reflecting on whether or not to have a child, expecting that having a child will change their understanding of the world, values and ways of being in the world. There will be some cases like this where it is true both that the value of a childless life according to the covering consideration based on the person’s properties without a child is no greater than the value of a life with a child according to the covering consideration based on the person’s properties with a child, and that the value of a life with a child according to the covering consideration based on the person’s

properties with a child is no greater than the value of a childless life according to the covering consideration based on the person's properties without a child. In a way, one can think of this as a case where someone faces a choice between two very different lives that both seem very good (or two very different lives that both seem very bad for that matter). Will it, in cases like this, be true that a small sweetening of either option changes how the options relate to each other? A small change in the expected price of diapers will change the value of having a child. Does that mean that that option suddenly becomes better than the other option (if the price of diapers goes down) or worse (if the price of diapers goes up)? That seems ridiculous.

A question of course arises concerning how widespread the incommensurability is when choice situations involve transformative experiences. That question cannot be given a conclusive answer and will probably also depend on the individuals making the choices (the extent of incommensurability might well depend on the person and their values). However, given Anderson's description of the general conditions under which incommensurability occurs, I am led to believe that it will be widespread.

3. Rational choice

Does incommensurability due to predictable transformative changes of the agent mean that no rational choice is possible in these situations? This depends on what is required for a choice to be rational. Some have argued that what matters is that the chosen option is *not worse than* any alternative (see, e.g., Sen 1997). If that is all that matters for rationality, it is perfectly possible to make a rational choice between two options that are incommensurable. Neither option is worse than the other (they are incommensurable), which means that both options can rationally be chosen. Some have argued that that is a too weak requirement of rationality (see, e.g., Chang 2013; Rabinowicz 2008).

I have in earlier work suggested that what rationality requires when options are incommensurable varies: the fact that an option is worse than no alternative is sometimes enough for it to be a rational choice, and sometimes it is not. Sometimes, two options, A and B, can be *dispositively incommensurable* so that both are rational choices in virtue of how they relate to each other with respect to the relevant covering consideration, while at other times, two options, a and b, are *non-dispositively incommensurable* so that neither is a rational choice in virtue of how they relate to each other with respect to the relevant covering consideration (Andersson & Herlitz 2022).

What determines if the incommensurability in a choice situation is dispositive or non-dispositive plausibly depends on what type of choice situation it is. The general idea is that incommensurability can be dispositive so that it is rational to choose either

of two incommensurable options in virtue of how they relate to each other with respect to the relevant covering consideration when the choice is *insignificant* but that it is non-dispositive when choices are *significant*. Significance-makers, in turn, are context- and agent-relative. Certain differences between the options might not make the choice situation significant in this sense when I choose a school for my child although they are making the choice situation significant when my neighbor chooses a school for their child. Specific differences between two options might make the choice situation significant when Sweden chooses a health policy at the same time as they are not making the choice situation significant when Ethiopia chooses a health policy. And so on.

In this paper, the focus is choice situations in which individuals make choices for themselves and predict that a transformative experience will occur if they make a certain choice. If I am right that options in such situations sometimes are incommensurable and that incommensurability can be both dispositive and non-dispositive, it is plausible that in at least some of these choice situations it will be impossible for individuals to make rational choices based on how the options relate to each other. In at least some choice situations characterized by predictable transformative experiences, prudential rational choice seems impossible.

That prudential rational choice seems impossible in some of these situations seems like a depressing conclusion. These are situations in which people consider whether to have children, whether to go through with life-changing medical treatments, whether it is worthwhile exploring religions, and so on. These are important choices, and it would be nice to be able to say something more than that it is perfectly possible that there is no rational choice.

There are, however, other ways of thinking about the possibility of rational choice when options are non-dispositively incommensurable. That options are non-dispositively incommensurable means that no option is a rational choice *in virtue of how the options relate to each other*. The comparative relation cannot ground a rational choice. That does not necessarily mean that there can be no ground for a rational choice. Other things might make an option a rational choice.

In the context of choice situations in which individuals make choices for themselves and predict that a transformative experience will occur if they make a certain choice there is an obvious contender for what could ground a rational choice: the individuals' own agency (cf. Chang 2013; Herlitz 2017). Rather than concluding that rational choice is impossible for individuals that face possible transformative experiences, we could say that individuals in such situations must turn to themselves to figure out what they ought to do. A person that faces the choice of going through with a transformative medical procedure and concludes that the options are incommensurable can ground a rational choice in themselves, by taking a stance and

choosing what kind of life they want to lead. Someone who contemplates having a child and predicts that to be transformative so that the options are incommensurable can ground a rational choice in a similar way: by forming a commitment to a certain type of future for themselves.

Sometimes, when an agent faces a predictable transformative experience, the options are non-dispositively incommensurable so that no option is a rational choice in virtue of how the options relate to each other. However, that does not mean that rational choice in such situations is impossible. Rational choice is possible, but it is grounded in something other than the comparative relation: the person's agency.

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