

# TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND RELIANCE ON MORAL TESTIMONY

Elizabeth Harman

**Abstract:** Some experiences are transformative in that it is impossible to imagine experiencing them until one experiences them. It has been argued that pregnancy and parenthood are like that, and that therefore one cannot make a rational decision whether to become a mother. I argue that pregnancy and parenthood are not like that; but that if even if they are, a woman can still make a rational decision by relying on testimony about the *value* of these experiences. I then discuss an objection that such testimony will be unreliable because parents will reflect on their *being glad* that their children exist, and will not realize that it's reasonable to be glad their children exist even if the parents' lives are thereby worse. I argue that despite this possible route to unreliable testimony, in general it is reasonable to rely on others' testimony about the value of their lives.

Experiences can be transformative in a number of different ways. One way an experience can be transformative is that it can be a new kind of experience, one which a person has not experienced before and cannot accurately imagine experiencing before having it first hand. Such an experience transforms, by expanding, a person's knowledge of what various experiences are like. A person who has never had any color experience before, who sees red for the first time, has an experience that is transformative in this sense. In [section 1](#), I discuss an argument that holds that the experience of pregnancy and parenthood is transformative in this sense, and that concludes that it is impossible to make a rational decision about whether to become a mother in the way that society encourages women to make such decisions. I argue that pregnancy and parenthood are not transformative in this sense, but that even if a woman is unable to imagine what pregnancy and parenthood would be like for her, she can still make a rational decision about whether to have those experiences by relying on the testimony of others about the *value* of these experiences. This is reliance on a certain kind of moral testimony.

In [section 2](#), I discuss a worry we might have about reliance on this kind of testimony. When a person reports on the comparative value of the

life she has actually had versus an alternative life, such as a life without parenthood, she may focus on the question of whether she *is glad* to have become a parent or whether she wishes she had had the different, childless life she would have had if she had not become a parent. I argue that facts about whether one is glad that something happened are not always good guides to the comparative value of the two possibilities being compared—the possibility in which it happened and the alternative in which it did not—even when one is perfectly reasonable in being glad that the thing happened. A person may reasonably be glad to have a child she loves, even if her life would have gone better if she had not had this child. The phenomenon extends to other life events, besides becoming a parent. A person may reasonably be glad to have become the person she is; the fact that she does not identify with the person she would have been in the alternative may be sufficient to make her glad to have her actual life rather than the alternative; but this may be so even if the alternative would have been better for her. For example, a person who grew up deaf may reasonably be glad to be the person she is, shaped by her deafness as she has been, and may not wish that her deafness had been cured when she was a child (if that had been possible); this may be true because she does not identify with who she would have been in the alternative, in which case her being glad to be deaf does not support the claim that her life would not have been better if her deafness had been cured.

I draw several lessons in [section 2](#). While there is a way that a person's judgments about the comparative value of her life (versus an alternative life) can be distorted by a reasonable attachment to the actual, that does not mean that all such judgments are distorted in this way. Discussion with a person about the basis of her value judgment can shed light on whether this kind of distortion is occurring. So my claim in [section 1](#) survives this worry: we indeed can reasonably rely on others' testimony about the value of their lives. I also argue that a certain argument against curing deafness in babies can be seen to fall prey to a mistaken move between what a person is glad happened and what would have been best for her.

## 1 Parenthood as Mysterious and Unknown

In this section, I will discuss the following argument:

Consider a woman deciding whether to become a parent; she is deciding whether to get pregnant, carry the pregnancy, and raise the created child. Society urges a woman making this decision to think about *what it would be like* to go through with it, and to base her decision on what it would be like. But being pregnant and raising a child are transformative experiences. One cannot know what it is like to have these experiences before having them, just

as someone who has never seen color before cannot know what it is like to see red until she sees red. So a woman deciding whether to become a parent cannot make a decision based on what it would be like to be a parent, because she cannot know what it would be like. If she cannot know what it would be like to be a parent, she cannot know how valuable that experience would be for her, so she cannot compare it to the value for her of not becoming a parent. Therefore, it is not possible to make a rational decision whether to conceive and raise a child by contemplating what it would be like to do so.<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that this argument fails.

Let's set aside an important worry about the argument above. What about moral considerations? Self-interested considerations are not the only considerations relevant to whether one should conceive a child. Suppose one knows that if one conceives a child now, then the child will have a very short life full of suffering with no joy and no meaningful experiences. This is sufficient to settle that one should not conceive now. Suppose one knows that if one conceives a child now, then some of one's relatives, for whom one is a caretaker, including siblings and/or elderly relatives, would end up without enough food to eat and their health would be in serious danger. This is sufficient to settle that one should not conceive now. These cases provide two examples of cases in which one can make a *rational* decision against conceiving and becoming a parent. As I understand the argument above, it is not meant to apply to such cases. We are to imagine a woman who knows about her situation that it would be *morally permissible* for her to conceive and become a parent; there is no consideration present in her situation that would make it morally wrong to conceive.<sup>2</sup> But it is also morally permissible to refrain from conceiving. So she is in the realm of moral permissibility, and self-interested considerations regarding what it would be like for her to become a parent are certainly *relevant* to making

---

<sup>1</sup> L. A. Paul (2015) makes this argument. I present her argument in my own words. Paul is explicit that she wants to focus on the choice to conceive, carry a pregnancy, and raise the child. I think her argument doesn't turn on the distinction between becoming a parent in this way and becoming a parent in another way, such as by adopting, but at one point she suggests that the biology of pregnancy may be important to her argument.

<sup>2</sup> In supposing that a woman can find herself in such a situation, knowing that it is morally permissible to conceive, we are rejecting David Benatar's view that it is always morally wrong to procreate. Benatar holds that the harms people will suffer in their lives count against procreating, while the benefits they will experience do not count in favor of procreating nor can they justify procreating. Seana Shiffrin also argues that procreation is morally problematic, because we cannot get the consent of the child before creating her. (See Benatar 2006 and Shiffrin 1993.)

this decision; perhaps society even holds that they settle what she should do.<sup>3</sup>

I will object to two claims the argument makes.

### 1.1 First Objection

The argument makes this claim:

Being pregnant and raising a child are transformative experiences. One cannot know what it is like to have these experiences before having them, just as someone who has never seen color before cannot know what it is like to see red until she sees red.

This claim is simply false. In my own case, I have a sister who is seven years younger than me. My feelings for my sister are sisterly but also, at times, parental in their nature. One of my closest friends had her first baby before I became a parent. This gave me two kinds of evidence about what it would be like to be a parent. First, I witnessed up close the relationship that she had with her baby, how it affected her daily life, and I learned a lot about what it was like for her by watching her and listening to her talk about her life; it helped of course that I knew her well. Second, I experienced my own love for her baby, which was unlike any feelings I had ever had (as an adult) for a baby. I also witnessed my own parents throughout my life, and I saw up close what their experience of parenthood was; I saw ways that it was hard for them, as well as ways that it provides good experiences to them. When I did choose to get pregnant and become a parent, I already had a lot of information about what it would be like. There was no huge revelatory experience that prompted in me the thought, “Oh, so *this* is what it is like to have a baby, to be a parent; I could not have pictured that it would feel *like this* before having the experience.” On the contrary, it’s been nice to experience on the inside what I had previously only witnessed from the outside. But loving my child feels much as I imagined it would. There is definitely a kind of joy I had never experienced until now. But I knew there would be.

What is the importance of the fact that in my case there was no radically new experience of a type I had not imagined? I am just one person. My own case is important because the argument makes the strong claim that it is *impossible* to know in advance what it would be like to be a parent. I did know. But I suspect that my case is really not that uncommon. Those who had their socks knocked off by the surprise of their parental feelings should

---

<sup>3</sup> Moral considerations are still relevant to a decision between two morally permissible options. The argument seems to assume that society does not recognize the fact that moral considerations can be relevant even within the realm of the morally permissible. For discussion of how moral considerations can be relevant to a decision between two morally permissible options, see [Harman Forthcoming-a](#) and [Harman Forthcoming-b](#).

be careful not to overgeneralize and think that everyone's experiences are like theirs.

Let's also clarify something about this part of the argument. It includes this claim:

One cannot know what it is like to be pregnant and to be a parent before having these experiences.

This might be ambiguous between the following two claims:

- (i) One cannot know ahead of time which of several possible experiences of pregnancy and parenthood one will have.
- (ii) One cannot know ahead of time, regarding any specific possible experience of pregnancy and parenthood that one may have, what *that experience* would be like.

The argument we are discussing makes claim (ii). Claim (i) is true, of course. A person who is considering pregnancy and parenthood knows that she might have an easy pregnancy or a difficult pregnancy, that her baby might be a good sleeper or a bad sleeper, and that she might get postpartum depression or not. She also knows that her child might get very sick. There are many uncertainties. Simply because there are uncertainties, it follows that a woman making this decision does not *know* ahead of time what it will all be like. But claim (i) is compatible with its furthermore being true that she knows, for each possibility I have mentioned, what it would be like to go through it. The argument we are discussing makes claim (ii), that for each possible path through pregnancy and parenthood, one simply cannot know what it would be like to experience that path before experiencing it.<sup>4</sup>

Claim (ii) is not true. My close friend had an easy pregnancy and a happy time while her child was a baby. As I've argued above, I went into my own pregnancy knowing a lot about what it would be like if my experience followed hers. Now consider the question of whether a person can know in advance what it would be like to suffer from postpartum depression. Many people, who have experienced depression already, can know a great deal about what this would be like. Others may know a lot about what it is like by witnessing postpartum depression in other people.

Given that there are different ways that pregnancy and parenthood can go, is one left unable to rationally decide what to do simply because one does not know *which outcome* will obtain? No. One can know a lot about the likelihoods of these possibilities in one's own case. Some people have risk factors for postpartum depression; and there is a certain likelihood of postpartum depression even for those without risk factors, so one can take that into account. A woman who is contemplating conceiving may have many friends who have become parents. She may see how their experiences of parenthood differ, partly due to their personalities. Reflecting on her

---

<sup>4</sup> In section 6.2, Paul clarifies that she is making this claim.

own personality, she may be able to make some predictions about what parenthood is likely to be like for her.

To summarize so far: My first objection to the argument is that, when it comes to conceiving and raising a child, it is actually possible to know a lot about what it will be like. While one should divide one's credence among different possible paths these experiences may take, one can know a great deal about what each of these paths would be like.

## 1.2 Second Objection

Let's continue to discuss the argument while setting my first objection aside. Suppose that the experience of conceiving and parenting really is unknowable in advance; suppose that it is like seeing red for the first time if one has never seen any colors before.

The argument makes the following assumption:

If one cannot know what an experience would be like, then one cannot know what the value of that experience would be.

This claim is not true. One can receive *testimonial evidence* regarding the value of an experience, which can give one *knowledge* of the value of that experience. Here are two cases to illustrate:

**Wonderful Mysterious Box:** There is a box that many people have opened. Each reports to me that the box gave them an amazing new experience, unlike anything they'd ever anticipated. Everyone is glad to have opened the box. Furthermore, they do not seem to be deluded. Each person seems to me to be living a more fulfilling life after opening the box, though I don't know what brought that on.

**Horrible Mysterious Box:** There is a box that many people have opened. Each reports to me that the box gave them a horrible new experience, unlike anything they'd ever anticipated. Each seems to me to be less happy, in an enduring way, after having opened the box.

In these cases, I can know about the value of having a certain experience, though I do not know anything specific about what that experience would be like. In Wonderful Mysterious Box, if I am given the option of opening the box, and I choose to do so, I make my choice based on an epistemically justified belief that opening the box will provide an experience worth having. If the experience in fact is wonderful (and if this is not in some way a Gettier case), then I indeed *knew* in advance that it would be wonderful. My choice to open the box is a good choice and it is a rational choice. Even if it turns out that I have a horrible experience, I still made a rational choice to open the box; it just turns out that my evidence was misleading about what opening the box would be like for me. (Sometimes we make

good choices that are also rational choices but that nevertheless have bad outcomes.)

Similarly, in Horrible Mysterious Box, I have an epistemically justified belief that it would be a bad experience to open the box. I can make a good decision, and a rational decision, to refrain from opening the box.

These cases show that one can come to know whether an experience will be a good or a bad experience *without* knowing anything specific about what the experience will be like.

Now let's consider someone who has trouble imagining a lot of the basic aspects of parenthood; let's call her Cecile. It's hard for Cecile to imagine feeling so devoted to another living being as she sees parents feel. It's hard for her to imagine the kind of unconditional love that parents report experiencing. It's hard for her to imagine the brain-mushifying sleep deprivation that some parents experience. It's hard for her to imagine what it's like to have "so little time," as parents keep reporting they have. When parents ask her what she does with all her free time, she is puzzled. For these reasons and others, let's suppose, Cecile finds herself deeply unable to imagine what parenting would be like. Can she get any information about how valuable it would be for her to become a parent?

(Note that the question is whether, for a particular way that pregnancy and parenting could go for her, she can know what the value would be for her of things going that way.)

She can. Her friends and family members who are parents can tell her about what they find valuable in their lives, and they can reflect on what good and bad things parenthood has brought into their lives. Her friends and family members who have lived long lives without becoming parents can reflect on what good and bad things their lives have involved. They can give her a lot of information about whether parenthood is valuable, and what about it is valuable, even if she remains unable to imagine what it would be like to be a parent from the inside.

Of course, if Cecile tries to base a decision whether to have a child on this kind of testimony, there are some challenges she faces.

There are worries about whether people will be honest with Cecile and about whether she will receive all the information that is out there. For too long, the truth about rates of postpartum depression was not publicly discussed. It is still not common enough for women to talk openly about the ways that breast-feeding can be very difficult and burdensome; it is difficult for many reasons: it can be hard to get it to work properly, there is a great deal of societal pressure (in some communities) to do it and to have it go well, it is very taxing even if it is going well, and there is inadequate support for nursing mothers in many workplaces. Rates of Autism-spectrum disorder are on the rise, but Cecile may not know how common it is, and she may not learn about what particular parenting challenges it brings. The impact that climate change will have on the lives of children conceived now is inadequately discussed and publicized. These

are just some examples; there is a great deal of relevant information that is out there, but that many women contemplating pregnancy and parenthood may not receive.

These worries concern the quality of the information that Cecile will receive. But this does not actually cast any doubt on the claim that Cecile can make a *rational decision* about whether to conceive and become a parent. Whether a decision is *rational* depends on what evidence the agent has and whether her decision makes sense given her evidence. If Cecile's information is impaired, that is a shame, and it makes her decision potentially worse *objectively*, but it does not raise a problem for her capacity to make a rational decision.<sup>5</sup>

Besides testimony from particular parents and non-parents she knows, our imagined Cecile might also receive other purely normative information. A trusted advisor might tell her, "For the vast majority of people, parenthood is a valuable experience worth having. And if we restrict our attention to people with your personality type and in your situation, the vast majority of these people have richer lives as a result of becoming parents." If she has good reason to trust this advisor, and if what the advisor says is true, then (unless this is somehow a Gettier case) this can be a way that Cecile can come to know what she is told. And such knowledge can be a good basis for a rational decision to go ahead and conceive a child.<sup>6</sup>

I have argued that the argument I introduced at the outset of [section 1](#) fails. I have objected in two ways. First, I argued that one can know a great deal about what pregnancy and parenthood will be like before having those experiences. (In particular, for particular ways these experiences can go, one can know about what it would be like for it to go in that way, even

---

<sup>5</sup> Paul mentions happiness studies that show that parents are often less happy than non-parents. Cecile may be unaware of these studies. As I've just said, this kind of consideration can affect the objective quality of Cecile's decision, but cannot affect the rationality of her decision. (Information of which she is unaware does not make her irrational.) But I also want to sound a note of caution about the significance of these studies. As I understand parenthood, it provides something deeply valuable. What makes it valuable is not primarily anything to do with ordinary happiness. It is, in Mill's sense, a higher-order pleasure, an experience with deep meaning. If it reduces a person's ordinary everyday happiness, it may still be overall more valuable than the alternative for that person. (Kauppinen [2015] also stresses the importance of considerations of meaningfulness, in discussing Paul's argument.)

<sup>6</sup> We might worry that it raises a red flag about Cecile's suitability to become a parent *that she cannot imagine it*. The fact that she can't picture herself as a parent may suggest that she's not suited to become a parent. After all, if she doesn't find herself longing for a future she imagines in which she is a parent, surely she's not the right type to be a parent. This worry can be addressed in two ways. First, it may be that Cecile does *desire* to be a parent though she cannot *picture* what it would be like; these may come apart. Second, I think it is actually pretty common for people to choose to become parents, because they are told by others that ultimately they will find it to be a valuable part of life, worth the sacrifices, although they cannot picture it yet, and they do not find themselves desiring it. The stereotypical person who has this kind of experience is a man; I would even say it is somewhat common for men to decide on parenthood in this way. But it could happen to a woman as well, and I'm sure it does. Many people who decide in this way end up loving parenthood.



if one doesn't know for sure which experience one will actually have if one goes ahead.) Second, I argued that one can receive testimonial evidence about the value of certain experiences, and make a rational decision on that basis, even if one doesn't know anything specific about what the experiences would be like.<sup>7</sup>

One might try to defend the argument by saying that my Second Objection is off-target. The argument simply concluded:

It is not possible to make a rational decision whether to conceive and raise a child by contemplating what it would be like to do so.

My suggestion—that someone can gain testimonial evidence about the value of becoming a parent—may not be a way of deciding “by contemplating what it would be like” to conceive and raise a child.

Here we can go one of two ways. We can interpret the original argument narrowly, so that my first objection directly touches it but my second objection does not. In that case, the conclusion of the argument is more narrow and less interesting than it at first appears: it is compatible with the claim that one *can* decide rationally by discussing the choice with others, if those conversations include specifically value-laden information. Alternatively, we can interpret the original argument as drawing the more interesting conclusion that simply contemplating the choice to procreate, and talking to one's friends about it, does not put one in a position to make a rational decision whether to procreate. Understood in this way, the argument is prey to both my objections.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Testimony about the Value of a Life Path

In [section 1](#), my second objection relied upon the following idea:

(\*) We can gain knowledge about the comparable value of two different life paths by talking to people who have taken these life paths, and in particular by hearing their testimony about the *value* of their own lives as compared to alternative life paths.

There are a number of different worries that might be raised about reliance on such testimony. Each person has only lived her own life, so when she compares her life to an alternative, her own information is asymmetric: she knows only one of those life paths from the inside. There are well-known psychological phenomena that we might worry distort people's judgments, such as the sour grapes effect (which would lead people to downgrade good things in the alternative) and the grass is always greener effect (which

<sup>7</sup> See [Dougherty et al. 2015](#) for a similar objection to the argument.

<sup>8</sup> I interpret Paul as making the more interesting version of the argument.

would lead people to upgrade good things in the alternative). Other worries might be raised as well.

In [section 2](#), I will focus on a different worry that we might raise. The worry arises from one route that a person might use to arrive at a judgment about the comparative value of her actual life path versus an alternative life path. She might ask herself whether she is glad to have lived the life she did, or whether she wishes she had lived the alternative life. This way of arriving at a judgment about the comparative value of the two life paths is unreliable, I will argue. There is a systematic distortion due to our *reasonable attachments to the actual*. I will develop this idea by first discussing a kind of *decision-making* that can go awry in a systematic way.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of [section 2.2](#), I will argue that this worry does not undermine (\*). Despite this worry, it is indeed possible to gain knowledge about the comparable value of alternative life paths by listening to people's testimony about this issue; and it is reasonable to rely on such testimony in making life choices.

## 2.1 "I'll Be Glad I Did It" Reasoning

It is very natural, in trying to decide whether to do something, to project oneself forward into the future in which one has done it, and to consider how one will feel about that decision. If one would regret the decision, it seems that one should not make it. If one would be glad one did it, it seems that one should do it. This is often an excellent way to reason. "If I study for my exam, tomorrow I'll be glad I did it. So I should study for my exam" is good reasoning.

This kind of reasoning is natural and appealing when dealing with big life decisions too, not just with small questions such as what to do this evening. When deciding whether to marry someone, which career to pursue, and which college to attend, it is natural to try to imagine oneself in the future having made a certain choice, and to try to figure out how one would later feel about having made the choice.

But, I will argue, this kind of reasoning can be bad reasoning, when it is used regarding choices that are *transformative* in a particular kind of way.

Consider a fourteen-year-old girl in the United States who is deciding whether to try to conceive a child. Some of her friends have children, and though having become mothers at such a young age is clearly very hard for them, she can see that they deeply love their children. She might reason as following:

"If I conceive a child now, I will raise this child and love him or her very dearly. I will not wish I had not conceived, because then I would not have had *this child* whom I will

---

<sup>9</sup> [Section 2](#) of this paper builds on some ideas from [Harman 2009](#).

love so much. I will be glad I conceived when I did. So, I should conceive now.”

This is clearly bad reasoning. But what distinguishes it from the reasoning regarding studying for an exam?

The difference, I claim, is that some experiences transform what it is reasonable for us to prefer. *Loving someone* makes it reasonable to prefer that she exists over an alternative in which she does not exist. Once a person has created and started raising a child, her love for the child makes it reasonable to prefer that the child exist. But before the child has been created, the person does not already love the child, and so *love* is not available as a basis to make a preference to procreate now reasonable. Other factors matter, such as what would be best for the person’s own life: procreating now, waiting and procreating later, or never procreating.<sup>10</sup>

In the exam case, there is no transformative experience that alters what the agent is reasonable in caring about. Both later and now, she wants to do well on her test and she wants to have enjoyable experiences like going to a movie. If she studies, she will be glad she did so, partly because she will deem doing well on the test to be more important to her than going to the movie. For the same reason, she should prefer to study now. Both tonight and in the morning, it is more important to her to do well on the test than to go to the movie.

In the absence of a transformative experience that affects what it is reasonable for an agent to care about, predicting that one will be glad to have done something is a good reason to believe it would be reasonable to now prefer to do that thing. But when doing something would bring with it a transformative experience—and in particular, a transformative experience that brings with it a *reasonable attachment*—then the prediction that one would be glad to have done it is not evidence that it is reasonable to prefer to do it now, before one has that attachment.

This is a second sense in which an experience can be *transformative*. Experiences are transformative in the sense I discussed in [section 1](#) if it is impossible for a person to accurately imagine what it is like to have them before having them. Experiences are transformative in the sense I discuss here in [section 2](#) if they transform what basic preferences it is reasonable for a person to have.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> One might claim that the teenager’s reasoning is bad reasoning because if, in the future, she will indeed be glad she did it, that will be *unreasonable*: because it is a bad idea to conceive now, in the future it would be unreasonable to be glad to have conceived. This claim makes a serious mistake about the nature of reasonable preference. It is indeed reasonable to prefer the people we love, and the lives we have actually had. There is nothing unreasonable about these preferences, though it would be unreasonable to make certain inferences on the basis of these preferences, such as the inference that things would not have been better for us in the alternative.

<sup>11</sup> Any experience that simply provides information might transform what preferences it is reasonable to have. I might reasonably prefer to drink the liquid in front of me; once I learn that it is bleach rather than water, what it is reasonable for me to prefer changes. But there is

Let's consider two more instances of "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning, and ask whether they exhibit good or bad reasoning.

There is much controversy in the deaf community regarding cochlear implants, which can enable some deaf people to process some sounds and to function in non-signing communities, schools, and work environments. Cochlear implants are more effective the earlier in life they are implanted, and so there is a debate about whether they should be given to babies.

There are a number of different arguments against cochlear implants. Some arguments focus on the fact that surgery is required to do the implantation, that successful integration into hearing communities is more likely in some situations than others, and that cochlear implants fall well short of giving deaf children the same kinds of auditory experiences that those who are born hearing have. These arguments focus on the specific shortcomings and limitations of cochlear implants as they exist today.

But some arguments against cochlear implants provide in principle opposition to implants; these are arguments against curing deafness, even if a safe and full cure were possible. These arguments rely crucially on the following claims, made by deaf adults (who grew up deaf): "We are glad to have grown up deaf. We do not wish that we had been cured of deafness as children, if that had been possible." Let's consider how the parents of a deaf baby might reason, if they were considering whether to choose a safe and full cure for deafness for their baby:

"If we do not cure our baby of deafness, then she will grow into a deaf adult whose life has been shaped, in part, by her experience of growing up deaf. We will love her as the person she is, and we will not wish she had been an utterly different person. We will be glad that we did not cure her deafness. So, we should not cure our baby of deafness."

This reasoning is bad reasoning, I claim. I hope it is clear that it is bad reasoning. While it is reasonable as an adult to be glad to be the person one in fact is, and it is reasonable to love one's child as the person she is, it does not follow that it would have been reasonable to prefer *this life path* for one's child at an earlier choice-point, before she had already been shaped by the path. It may be that another life path would be better for one's child, although it would be so different that one would later not wish for it if one did not take it.

Finally, let's consider an argument regarding abortion. Some advocates against abortion make moving personal speeches. "I was almost aborted," they say. They appeal to the reasonable preference that anyone might have for the people who actually do exist. Whether we know her or not, we are glad she exists; we are glad she was not aborted. Does this mean that her

---

no change in my *basic preferences* in a case like this. I still prefer to drink water and prefer not to drink bleach.

pregnant mother should have had the same preference, back when she was pregnant? It does not.

Consider the following reasoning that a pregnant woman might engage in:

“It would be very difficult for me if I continue this pregnancy and raise a child at this time in my life. But if I do, I will love my child dearly and be glad to have him or her. I will not wish I had aborted, because then I would not have had my child. Therefore, I should continue my pregnancy.”

Again, this is bad reasoning. The fact that the woman would have a reasonable attachment if she continues the pregnancy does not mean that she should decide in favor of the child *now*, before she loves the child and is attached to him or her.

Now that we’ve seen that “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning is often bad reasoning, should we conclude that it is never good reasoning? We should not. The exam reasoning is good reasoning. In the exam case, the considerations that in fact make it the case that one will be glad one did it are also the considerations that in fact make it the case that one should do it. (Note that I am not saying that *the fact that one will be glad one did it* is what makes it the case that one should do it.) That is, one is glad one did it because it really is more important to pass the exam than to see that movie at that time, and these are the same considerations that make it the case that one should study.

So how should we understand the cases in which “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning is bad reasoning? We can see these as cases in which the agents *are in a position to realize* that their predicted future attitude of being glad to have done it *would be due to a reasonable attachment* and would not be sensitive to the considerations that are relevant now to how they should make these choices. They do not already have these attachments: the teenager does not already have a child she loves; the parents of the deaf baby do not already know and love their child as a person who has grow up deaf; the pregnant woman does not already know and love her child. So, the attachments are not available to ground reasonable preference now for outcomes that may actually be worse, and may be the result of bad choices.

What I am claiming is that sometimes, after one makes a bad choice, or after something bad happens to one, one may nevertheless have a reasonable attitude of *being glad that one did it*, or *being glad that the thing happened*, because one may be reasonably attached to how things actually are. Reasonable attachments can lead us astray, as in the bad “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning above. But reasonable attachments can also be understood in a clear-eyed manner. A woman who became a parent as a teen might say, truly, “I should not have had a child as a teen. But I love my son and I’m so glad I did, because otherwise I wouldn’t have had him. That I love him and am glad to have had him—that I would not wish to change

anything for myself—in no way makes me think that teen parenthood is a good choice for anyone to make.”

## 2.2 General Moral Arguments and Moral Testimony

There are moral arguments that are sometimes made that are analogues of the “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning discussed above. A deaf adult might argue that curing deafness is morally wrong as follows:

“I would have been a completely different person if I had been cured of deafness as a baby, if that had been possible. But I do not wish I had been cured of deafness, and no one should wish that I had been cured of deafness. So, no one should wish to cure deafness in babies today. So it would be morally wrong to cure deafness in babies today.”

An anti-abortion activist might argue:

“I was almost aborted, but I am glad I was not. Everyone should be glad I was not. So everyone should prefer not to abort babies now. So it would be morally wrong to abort babies now.”

Like “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning, these arguments move from a claim that a certain predicted future *backward-looking* preference is reasonable (indeed, is a preference we should have) to a claim that this preference should be had now *prospectively*, before a choice and its effects have happened. Because the predicted future preferences in question are reasonable and appropriate only due to the way we are and should be *attached* to actual people who have actually turned out a certain way, that they are reasonable does not mean it would be reasonable (or that it is required) to have the same preferences now.

As I have discussed these arguments so far, they simply make a mistake about the nature of *reasonable preference*: what would make a preference reasonable in the future does not make the preference reasonable now. But we can also understand the deafness argument as implicitly relying on moral testimony; it implicitly relies on testimony about the value of certain life paths. We can see the argument as implicitly including the following line of thought:

“I, a deaf adult who grew up deaf, am glad to have grown up deaf; I do not wish I had been cured of deafness as a baby, if that had been possible. *Therefore*, my life having grown up deaf is no worse than a life having grown up hearing.”

This implicit reasoning is flawed. One cannot generally move from the claim that one reasonably is glad that something happened to the conclusion that it would not have been better if that thing had not happened—not even

that it would not have been better *for oneself*. People can be reasonable in being attached to being the particular people they are. One might prefer one's own life to a radically different life one might have had, even if the other life would have been better, if one cannot relate to who one would have been if one had had that life.

Thus, we can see that we must be cautious in accepting people's testimony about the value of their own lives. A person might mistakenly move from the claim that she does not *wish* her life had been different in a certain way—which may be perfectly reasonable—to the claim that her life would not have been better in that alternative. This inference is unwarranted when the experience at issue is a *transformative experience*, one that transforms what it is reasonable to prefer. Many transformative experiences make it reasonable to prefer worse outcomes, and to be glad after the fact to have made bad choices.

While there is reason to be cautious, these considerations do not imply that we should in general be reluctant to believe people's testimony about the value of their own lives. Rather, there is a particular pitfall of reasoning of which we should be aware. One thing this means is that when a person offers testimony about the value of her life (compared to an alternative), now that we are aware of this potential mistake, it makes sense to probe a bit into the reasons that she makes this judgment about the value of her life. If her main reason seems to be that if things had been different, then she would not have had something to which she is deeply *attached* (such as a child, or her child's particular personality, or her own particular personality), then we have reason to doubt her claims. But if her judgment seems to involve genuine reflection on what is good and bad about her actual life versus what would have been good and bad about the alternative, then the worry I have raised does not give us reason to doubt.<sup>12</sup>

A person's judgment of how the value of her life compares to an alternative may well be based on a genuine recognition of the truth about the value comparison between the two life paths. If such a person offers testimony about the comparative value of her life, and someone believes what she says on the basis of her testimony, then this is a way for the listener to gain some knowledge about the comparative value of these two life paths. The following claim is indeed true:

(\*) We can gain knowledge about the comparable value of two different life paths by talking to people who have taken these life paths, and in particular by hearing their

<sup>12</sup> It is an interesting question whether the experience of living life as a deaf person is a transformative experience in the first sense (discussed in [section 1](#)); is it impossible for someone who has not had such a life to know what it is like to have such a life? I am doubtful that living as a deaf person is transformative in the first sense, not because I think it is easy to understand what it is like, but because I think that people have wonderful capacities for story-telling and description of experiences, so that people in telling their own stories can communicate a great deal about what their lives have been like.

testimony about the *value* of their own lives as compared to alternative life paths.

What should we conclude specifically about the kind of testimonial evidence that Cecile, our imagined prospective mother from [section 1](#), receives?

Because parents love their children, it is reasonable for them to be glad to have had their children, and to not wish to have remained childless. A parent might mistakenly conclude that her life is better for having had her child simply because she prefers things as they actually are. This might happen for a parent whose life is actually much worse than it would have been if she had not become a parent, and even for someone who is in a position to realize that. If such a person tells Cecile that having a child made her life better, then Cecile is receiving some misleading information. But this doesn't mean she can't make a rational decision.

We might think that Cecile should be able to diagnose that parents are making this mistake, which would make her irrational to rely on their judgments. This seems right. *If* it's true that Cecile should be able to see that a particular parent's saying "my life is very valuable as a result of having my child, more valuable than it would have been if I had remained childless" is a result of the parent's simply being attached to her child, and is insensitive to any comparison of value between the two outcomes, *then* she is making an epistemic mistake if she takes this value judgment on board and relies on it. But this does not show that in general we cannot rely on the testimony of parents.

Parents and non-parents who make judgments about the comparative value of their lives need not be making the mistake I have outlined in [section 2](#). As I have already mentioned, it is perfectly possible to look back clear-eyed at a bad choice to procreate and think, "I should not have made that choice. But I love my child, and don't wish I'd chosen differently." But similarly, it is possible to look back clear-eyed at a good choice to procreate, and think, "I'm glad I made my choice, because I love my child. The fact that I'm glad doesn't tell me whether I made a good choice. But when I think about what I gained by having a child, what it cost me, and what my alternative life would have been like, I can see that my life is richer and deeper for having had a child. This choice was for the best, for me." That speech could be true, and it could be an expression of the speaker's *knowledge* about her situation. Even people who have not articulated all of that to themselves may be expressing genuine knowledge when they offer testimony about the comparative value of their lives.

### 3 Conclusion

It is an interesting question how inaccessible some experiences are to our understanding if we have not had them. I discussed an argument according to which pregnancy and childbirth are transformative experiences in that it



is only by having them that a person can know what they are like. I argued that pregnancy and childbirth are not inaccessible to us in this way, but that even if they are, we can still make rational decisions whether to have these experiences by relying on the moral testimony of others about the value of their experiences.

I then went on to argue that there is a certain kind of mistake that people can make in forming judgments about the value of their own lives versus alternative lives. A person might reasonably be glad to have had the life she has actually led—she might have a reasonable attachment to the actual—even though the alternative would have been better for her. I argued that although this kind of mistake is possible, we can still reasonably rely on others' testimony about the comparative value of their lives versus alternative lives they could have led.

Elizabeth Harman

E-mail : [charman@princeton.edu](mailto:charman@princeton.edu)

References:

- Benatar, David. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dougherty, Tom, Sophie Horwitz, and Paulina Sliwa. 2015. "Expecting the Unexpected." *Res Philosophica* 92 (2): 301–321. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2015.92.2.5>.
- Harman, Elizabeth. 2009. "I'll Be Glad I Did It' Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires." *Philosophical Perspectives* 23: 177–199. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2009.00166.x>.
- Harman, Elizabeth. Forthcoming-a. "Morality Within the Realm of the Morally Permissible." *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*.
- Harman, Elizabeth. Forthcoming-b. "Morally Permissible Moral Mistakes." *Ethics*.
- Kauppinen, Antti. 2015. "What's So Great about Experience?" *Res Philosophica* 92 (2): 371–388. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2015.92.2.10>.
- Paul, L. A. 2015. "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting." *Res Philosophica* 92 (2): 149–170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2015.92.2.1>.
- Shiffrin, Seana. 1993. *Consent and the Morality of Procreation*. Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University.