

Choosing to have children.¹
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Introduction.

This paper argues that if you choose to have a child by consulting your preferences, where your preferences are based upon projections about what it would be like for you to have a child, your choice is not rational. The problem is not a problem for decision theory, for decision theory has the resources to handle the problem if we change the mode of decision-making. The problem is rather a problem for our ordinary conception of major life-changing decisions as rational decisions. My argument combines three independently plausible premises.

The first premise is derived from the widely adopted cultural practice of deciding whether or not to have a child by making a careful assessment of what it would be like. That is, we ordinarily think that you should reflect carefully on what it would be like to be a parent before deciding to have a child. The idea behind this cultural prescription is that children are an enormous responsibility, and you should be sure you are ready to have one before you go ahead and do it. The reflection on what it would be like to have a child is supposed to involve considering whether you'll be happy as a parent, considering whether you'll find having a child meaningful or satisfying, understanding the personal sacrifices involved, evaluating the sort of person you want to become (or don't want to become), and thinking through your hopes, dreams and plans for how you'd like to live your life. The assessment crucially involves your future phenomenal beliefs, desires, happiness, overall life satisfaction, along with other mental states with phenomenal characters.

¹ Copyright © L. A. Paul. Thanks are due to Kieran Healy for discussion.

The second premise is that this assessment is performed in order for you to compare what it would be like for you to become a parent to what it would be like for you to remain childless, so that you can choose the best outcome. More precisely, the assessment is carried out as part of our ordinary approach towards the choice to have a child, which is a rough approximation of how we should choose in accordance with a standard model for decision theory where the rational agent compares the utilities of outcomes and chooses to bring about those outcomes with the highest expected utility.

The third premise is that the experience of having a child is a unique, radically transformative experience. Having one's first child is psychologically life-changing; an experience like no other. Agents who have a child undergo a phenomenal change comparable to the phenomenal change in Frank Jackson's famous case of black-and-white Mary, who grows up in a colorless environment before she sees red for the first time.²

After defending these three premises, I use them to argue that if one wants to choose rationally, one cannot apply our ordinary decision-making procedure when choosing whether to become a parent. The argument, in its simplest form, is straightforward: to rationally choose, based on maximizing the expected value of your phenomenological preferences, to have your first child, you must be able to determine the phenomenal outcomes (i.e., what it is like for you) of your act and assign probabilities to these outcomes. But just as you cannot know what it is like to have red-experiences before you've ever experienced redness, you cannot know what it is like to have a child before you've had a child. This means that, before you choose, you cannot determine the phenomenal outcomes or assign probabilities, for you cannot know what it is like to have a child until you have

² Jackson (1986).

actually had a child. Thus, you cannot compare outcomes and choose so as to maximize your expected utility.

I do not argue that there are no circumstances under which we cannot rationally choose to have a child. There are, and we can. Perhaps we can change our decision-theoretic procedure and use different formulae, ones that guide our choosing under extreme ignorance or other constraints. Or perhaps we can use the same decision-theoretic model but choose on some nonphenomenological basis, such as choosing to maximize our financial security. Or perhaps we can define choosing rationally in a different way. Or perhaps we could dispense with decision theory altogether when judging whether a choice is rational. But these observations, while worth exploring, are not opposed to the point I am making here. I argue that that the most natural, ordinary and widely recommended way of deciding to have a child, that is, by reflecting on what we think it would be like to be a parent, determining the values of the various outcomes, and then choosing the outcome that we think will have the greatest phenomenal value, does not meet the requirements for making an objectively rational choice. This is surprising, and, as I discuss below, it has some interesting consequences beyond the particular case of child-bearing.

Now I'll develop the argument in detail.

§1. *Deciding whether to start a family.*

Consider the following scenario:

Scenario: You have no children. However, you have reached a point in your life when it would be personally, financially and physically appropriate to have a family. You sit down

and think about whether you want to have a child. You discuss it with your partner, and contemplate the choice, carefully evaluating what it would be like for you and your partner to have a child versus what it would be like for you to remain childless.³ After careful consideration, you choose one of these options:

For. You decide to have a child.

Against. You decide *not* to have a child.

Your behavior follows the cultural norms of our society, where couples are encouraged to think carefully and clearly about what they want before deciding that they want to start a family. Many prospective parents decide to have a baby because they have a deep desire to have children based on the (perhaps inarticulate) sense that having a child will help them to live a full, happy, and somehow complete life, that is, it will help them have experiences with a kind of phenomenal character that one can describe as “life satisfaction” or “meaningfulness.” While many people recognize that an individual’s choice to have a child has important external implications, the decision is thought to necessarily involve an intimate, personal component, such that the decision is best made from the personal standpoints of prospective parents. Guides for prospective parents often suggest that people ask themselves if having a baby will enhance an already happy life, and encourage prospective parents to reflect on, for example, how they see themselves in five and ten years’ time, whether they feel ready to care for and nurture another human being, whether they

³ In this example, I am assuming that you and your partner are physically able to have a child. Below, I will consider an implication of my argument for those who cannot physically produce a child.

think they'd be a happy and content mother (or father), whether having a baby would make life more meaningful, whether they are ready for the tradeoffs that come with being a parent, whether they desire to continue with their current career plans or other personal projects, and so on.⁴

This assessment of one's prospects and plans for the future is a culturally important part of the procedure that one is supposed to undergo before attempting to get pregnant, which is perhaps intended to ensure that each child is wanted and loved, and that our society has as many happy, well-adjusted families as possible. Since (in the usual case) the parents assume primary responsibility for the child they create, the thought is that it is important to frame the decision in terms of one's making a personal choice, one that carefully weighs the character of one's future experiences.⁵ People often frame the decision this way when they make this choice, and more importantly for my purpose here, we are (culturally speaking) supposed to frame the decision this way since, given the responsibilities we are choosing to take on, we are supposed to think carefully about the personal implications of the choice. Many choose to have a child. Many prefer to remain childless.

§2. *Decision theory: the standard model.*

When we make a choice to do something, we make a decision: we consider various things we might do and then choose to do one of them. Under what I'll call the *standard model*, to

⁴ I am ignoring external, nonphenomenal factors one might weigh when making a choice about whether to procreate, such as the utilities of environmental impact or population control. A version of my argument that takes these factors into account holds unless these utilities are supposed to swamp any personal phenomenal effects.

⁵ The importance of this sort of reflective approach is underscored by the general cultural prescription against unplanned pregnancies and in the attention given to family planning by many social and religious organizations.

make a choice rationally, we first determine the possible outcomes of each thing we might do, then assign a probability to each outcome to calculate its utility, and then choose the act that would result in the highest expected utility, where the expected utility is measured by the weighted average of the utilities of the possible outcomes of the act. We might soften the standard a little bit: perhaps we can do no better than glean an *approximate* expected utility. After all, it is probably impossible to calculate the expected utility of each act with precision. But we might be able to approximate a rational choice by choosing between approximate expected utilities.

Various caveats apply. For example, sometimes outcomes have equal expected utilities. Then no unique act is the rational one to choose. Sometimes expected utilities are metaphysically indeterminate. Then it is metaphysically indeterminate which act is the rational one to choose. Etc. I assume that such caveats do not apply in *Scenario*.

In *Scenario*, the acts in question are either having a child or not having a child. The decision is the choice between whether to have a child or whether to remain childless, and an approximation of the standard model is used. The outcomes of either act are its effects, which have dramatic financial, emotional, mental and physical consequences. The dramatic effects follow the act of not having a child as much the act of having one: for example, not having a child usually means that you'll have very different experiences than you'd have had if you had a child, and has follow-on effects such as the fact that you'd have significantly fewer financial costs for at least eighteen years following the date from when the omission can be said to "obtain."

The primary concern in *Scenario* is with the utility of the act “for the agent,” where this describes the utility of the act for the agent, and includes the utility of the agent’s perspective or point of view, that is, the utility of what it is like to be the person who made the choice. Since what it is like to be the agent includes what it is like to have her beliefs, desires, emotions, dispositions, and to perform subsequent acts, in *Scenario* the overall utility of the act includes the utility of what it is like to have these additional effects and their attendant consequences.

Given the standard model, to act rationally when choosing between having a child and not having a child, you determine the probability of each outcome of each act, the value of each outcome of each act, and then calculate the expected utility of each act. After calculating the expected utility of each act, you then choose the act that has the highest expected utility. In the case where you have a child, most of the utilities depend on what it is like for you to have a child, including what it is like to have the beliefs, desires, emotions and dispositions that result, directly and indirectly, from having a child. In the case where you remain childless, most of the utilities depend on what it is like for you to experience the effects of not having a child. To rationally choose between these cases, that is, to choose either *For* or *Against*, you must compare the overall utilities of each choice.

Of course, having a child or not having a child will have utility with respect to plenty of other things, such as the local demographic, the environment, and anything else in the forward light cone of the act. However, the primary focus here is on an agent who is trying to decide, largely independently of these external or impersonal factors, whether he or she wants to have a child, since in the usual case the utility of the act for the agent plays the

central role, if not the only role, in the decision to procreate. That said, the value of the choice is also affected if we assess the wider scope of the utility of the act, since even in cases with a wider purview, the utility of the act for the agent must be evaluated in order to determine the overall expected utility of the choice. For instance, you might choose to have a child because you desire to have some of your DNA transmitted to future generations. But the utility of satisfying this desire must be weighed against other outcomes. If, say, the utility of your experience of having a child was sufficiently positive or sufficiently negative, it could swamp the utility of satisfying your desire to leave a genetic imprint.

§3. *Transformative experience.*

Both the expected utility of having a child and the expected utility of not having a child are highly dependent upon the experiences created by the beliefs, desires, emotions and dispositions that are the outcomes of each act. In other words, the overall utility of your act in *Scenario*, given the way the choice is being conducted, depends largely on the phenomenal character of the mental states that result from it.

The fact that the utility of your act depends significantly on what it is like for you to experience the effects of your act is neither surprising nor unusual from a commonsensical point of view. But what is surprising and unusual is that this particular act—the act of having a baby—has special epistemic consequences. In particular, the act of having a baby is epistemically special because one’s phenomenology is drastically changed by it, either immediately or over a short period of time, in a way that has a huge effect on the beliefs, desires, emotions and dispositions that are the outcomes of the choice.

Why do parents experience such a dramatic phenomenological change? It is a normal reaction to the intense series of dramatically new experiences that one has when one has a child. This is most obvious when the parent in question is the mother. The intensity of the extended act of carrying the child, the physicality of giving birth, the recognition of the new fact of the existence of one's very own child, and the exertion involved in caring for a newborn results in a dramatic change in one's physical, emotional and mental states. The experiences are also very intense for involved fathers. It is common for fathers to date their changed phenomenal state from the moment they saw their newborn baby.

This suggests that the primary basis for the radical change in phenomenology in both parents is the simple fact that the content of the state of *seeing and touching your newborn child* carries with it a unique phenomenological character.⁶ In other words, this experience is a unique, formative experience, unlike any other. At least in the normal case, one has a dramatically new, and life-changing, experience when one has a child. There are probably attendant biological reasons for the phenomenological change in parents: to be motivated to produce, nurse and care for a child, parents experience dramatic hormonal and other biological changes, and fans of evolutionary biology will hold that there is a biological mandate for the physiological changes in both parents that underlie the felt attachment to one's offspring. In any case, whether the primary basis for one's new phenomenology is simply the experience of being in the state of seeing and touching your newborn child, or being in some biological state, or whether it is the more extended and complex series of experiences from pregnancy through childhood, or a combination of all of these, the new

⁶ The phenomenological character of having a child for a blind or otherwise differently abled person will be different but just as unique.

parent has an experience he or she has never had before—an experience with a unique phenomenal character.⁷

While many new experiences are similar enough to other experiences such that we can project forward to get a sense of what the new experience might be like, this is not the case with the experience of having a child. The uniqueness of this experience means that it is distinctive—it is radically different from other kinds of experiences, and so we can't project from other experiences to know what it is like. I'll call this sort of experience a *transformative* experience. While many new experiences are similar enough to other, more familiar experiences that we can project forward from the familiar experiences to have an approximate sense of what the new experience would be like, this is not the case with transformative experiences. So the case described by *Scenario* is special because it involves a choice of whether to perform an act that results in a transformative experience.

§4. *What experience teaches.*

Some famous examples from the philosophy of mind bring home the general phenomenological point about how transformative experiences are not projectable. This is because some things can only be known via experience. Frank Jackson developed a famous thought experiment that relies on this fact about experience, arguing that a person who has never seen red cannot know what it is like to see red. His example concerns Mary, a brilliant neuroscientist, who has had only black and white experiences. Mary knows all the facts in a

⁷ Even the parent who reacts with numb disbelief or shock upon the presentation of her child has an experience with a unique phenomenal character, despite the fact that the experience does not have the phenomenal character it is “supposed” to have. Indeed, this shocked reaction could have its distinctive character in part *because* it does not have the joyous character the agent was expecting.

complete physics (and other sciences), including all the causal and relational facts and functional roles consequent on knowing these facts, and including all the scientific facts about light, the human eye's response to light with wavelengths between 600 and 800 nanometers and any relevant neuroscience. Yet, when she has her first experience of red, she learns something new: she learns what it is like to see red.

“Mary is confined to a black-and-white room, is educated through black-and-white books and through lectures relayed on black-and-white television. In this way she learns everything there is to know about the physical nature of the world... It seems, however, that Mary does not know all there is to know. For when she is let out of the black-and-white room or given a color television, she will learn what it is like to see something red...” (Jackson 1986, p. 291). As Jackson points out, when Mary leaves her room for the first time, she has a radically new experience: she experiences redness for the first time, and from this experience, and this experience alone, she knows what it is like to see red.

Because of Mary's lack of experience, before she leaves her black-and-white room, she lacks a certain kind of knowledge. Perhaps that knowledge is knowledge of a physical fact. Perhaps that knowledge involves a lack of a certain kind of ability or know-how. Perhaps it's knowing an old fact in a new way. Or perhaps, after leaving her room, she knows a new fact of some other sort.⁸ None of that matters here. The lesson for us is simply that black-and-white Mary is in an impoverished epistemic position. Until she actually has the experience of seeing red, she cannot know what it is like to see red.

⁸ See Lewis (1990) and Stanley (2011) for relevant discussions of what experience teaches.

An important feature of this example relies on the fact that, given Mary's exclusively black and white experiences, the experience of seeing red is unique and distinctive for her. Before she leaves her room, she cannot project forward to get a sense of what it will be like for her to see red, since she cannot project from what she knows about her other experiences to know what it is like to see color. As the example is described, then, before she leaves the room, her previous experience is not projectable in a way that will give her knowledge about what it is like to see red. As a result, when she leaves her room and sees red for the first time, her experience is transformative.

Now let's restrict Mary's epistemic situation a little more than it was in Jackson's thought experiment. Let's say that, before she leaves her room, because she doesn't know what it is like to see red, or indeed what it is like to see any sort of color at all, she doesn't know if she'll enjoy seeing red.⁹ And so she doesn't know whether it'll be her favorite color, or whether it'll be fun to see red, or whether it'll be joyous to see red, or frightening to see it, or whatever.

For our purposes, Mary's impoverished epistemic situation means, first, that since Mary doesn't know how it'll phenomenally feel to see red before she see it, she also doesn't know what emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions will be caused by what it's like for her to see red. Maybe she'll feel joy and elation. Or maybe she'll feel fear and despair. And so on.

Second, because she doesn't know what emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions will be

⁹ In Jackson's thought experiment, because Mary has all the scientific information we'd have at the end of science, Mary might know what brain states will be caused by seeing red, and thus might, at least arguably, know what beliefs and desires, etc. are caused. This kind of epistemic access is unavailable to ordinary humans reflecting on whether to have a child, so we can dispense with this possibility.

caused by her experience of seeing red, she doesn't know what it'll be like to have the set of emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions that are caused by her experience of seeing red, simply because she has no guide to which set she'll actually have. And there is a third layer of epistemic poverty: she doesn't know what it'll be like to have any of the phenomenal-redness-involving emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions that will be caused by her experience of seeing red. Even if she could somehow know that she'll feel joy upon seeing red, she doesn't know what it will be like to feel-joy-while-seeing-redness until she has the experience of seeing red.

This means that, when Mary chooses to leave her black-and-white room, thus choosing to undergo a transformative experience, she faces a deep subjective unpredictability about the future. She doesn't know what it will be like to see red. She doesn't know what emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions will be caused by what it's like to see red. And she doesn't know what it'll be like to have to have any of the mental states that involve phenomenal redness. In other words, she doesn't know the phenomenal outcomes of her choice to leave her black-and-white room.

The subjective unpredictability of Mary's epistemic situation is simply the result of the transformational nature of her experience combined with basic facts about how experience bestows knowledge. Of course, the Mary example is just one of many possible examples involving transformative experiences. Another such experience might be the experience a new recruit has when he or she goes off to the front. If the recruit has no experience of war, what it is like to be on the front lines of a battle can be a transformative experience, as the evidence of post-traumatic shock amongst veterans can testify to.

§5. *The transformative experience of parenthood.*

A person who is to become a parent, before they have a child, is in an epistemic situation very similar to that of black-and-white Mary before she leaves her room. Just like Mary, she is epistemically impoverished.

Before a person becomes a parent, she has never experienced the unique state of seeing and touching her newborn child. She has never experienced the full compendium of the extremely intense series of beliefs, emotions, physical exhaustion and emotional intensity that attends the carrying, birth, presentation, and care of her own child, and hence she does not know what it is like to have these experiences. Moreover, since having a child is unlike any other human experience, before she has had the experience of seeing and touching her newborn child, she cannot even have an approximate idea as to what it is like to have that experience. Like the experience of seeing color for the first time, the experience of having a child is not projectable. All of this results from the fact that having a child is transformative—and far more so than the experience of seeing red for the first time.

The transformative experience of having a child brings with it profound changes in other epistemic states. As a result, in *Scenario*, your epistemically impoverished state means that you face a deep subjective unpredictability when choosing whether or not to have a child.

In particular, because you cannot know what it is like to have a child before you've had one, you also cannot know what emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions will be caused by what it's like to have a child. Maybe you'll feel joy and elation when your child is born. Or

maybe you'll feel anger and despair (many parents experience postnatal depression). And so on. Because you doesn't know what emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions will be caused by your experience of what it's like to have a child, you don't know what it'll be like to have the set of emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions that are caused by your experience of seeing red, simply because you have no guide at all to which set it'll be. Finally, you don't know what it'll be like to have any of the particular emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions that involve the phenomenal character of having a child. As a result, if you have a child, your epistemic states will change in subjectively unprojectable ways.

§6. *Choosing to have a baby is not rational.*

Now, we have all the parts of the argument. Recall the standard model for decision-making described in §2. You, as a rational agent, are supposed to deliberate between acts: you determine each outcome of your act, the probability of each outcome of each act, the value of each outcome of each act, and then calculate the overall expected utility of each act. After calculating the expected utility of each act, you choose the act that has the highest expected utility.

The standard model, or at least a reasonable folk approximation of it, applies to the case described by *Scenario*. Here, you are deciding whether to have a child based on the expected utility of the act for you and your partner. The way the story is supposed to go, consistent with our cultural norms, is that when you sit down and think about whether you want to start a family, you contemplate the value of the results of your choice, evaluating the costs and benefits to you and your partner if you have a child versus the costs and benefits to you and your partner if you remain childless. You think about what it would be like to have a

child, how it will affect you and your partner, and how it will affect the other parts of your life, and you decide on the outcome with the best overall effects, where “best overall effects” is short for “effects that maximize expected utility.” Even if the contemplation is not as detailed or precise as the perfect rational agent could make it be, some approximation of this approach is supposed to embody our ordinary way of taking a clear-headed, reasonably rational approach to the question.

Here’s the rub. The subjective unpredictability attending the act of having a child makes this story about family planning into little more than pleasant fiction. No matter which option you choose, on this approach, your decision is not even an approximation of a rational act. It is impossible for you to use this approach to rationally choose *For*. It is also impossible for you to use this approach to rationally choose *Against*. Arguably, rationality does not even *permit* making either choice. Distinguishing between evidential and causal probability does not help: it is not rational to choose either option whether we understand your decision as one based on evidence or as one based on a judgment about the causal efficacy of the act. Finally, even a distinction between practical rationality and theoretical rationality will not help: your choice in *Scenario* is neither theoretically nor practically rational in the intended sense.¹⁰

How did we find ourselves in this situation? It results from the fact that we want to use information about our future phenomenological states to make the choice, but due to the transformative nature of the act of having a child, that information is inaccessible to us. If it is true that until one has a child one cannot know what it is like to have a child, and that

having a child can be a transformative experience, then we lack epistemic access to the facts we need in order to calculate the utility of having a child. Once you have a child, will you care less about your career? Will you value your child's welfare over your own? Will you still love your cat just as much? Will you love your partner more? Will you love your partner less?—Who knows? The utility of having a child, at least as it is standardly understood, depends on what it is like for that person to have a child, and without the ability to know what it is like to have a child, one lacks the ability to use the standard model to calculate, or even to approximate, the expected utility of the act. A prospective parent doesn't know the values of the phenomenal outcomes (what it's like to have a child) of the act, she doesn't know the probabilities to assign to the outcomes, and thus she doesn't know the expected utilities for what it's like to have a child—so she cannot make the choice on that basis.

Softening the standard for rational choice will not help. The problem is not that a prospective parent can only grasp the approximate values of the outcomes of the act. The problem is that she cannot determine the values of the outcomes or the chance of their occurring with any degree of accuracy at all. The deep subjective unpredictability she faces when choosing whether or not to have a child is the source of the fact that, using the standard model, she is unable to make or even approximate a rational decision to have or to not have a child.

It should be obvious that, in this discussion, I am abstracting from any moral considerations that might affect the choice to have or not to have children, and I am not taking a position on the nature of moral deliberation - i.e., whether it is a form of rational deliberation, and whether its aim is to maximize utility. I am starting from what I take to be our predominant

cultural paradigm of how to consider the question of whether to have or not to have children. According to that paradigm, we are to approach this decision as a personal matter where what is at stake is our own expected happiness and a sort of personal self-realization.

And so we find ourselves in an interesting position: there is a conflict between the ordinary way we are supposed to make this decision, and the epistemic fact that having a baby is a transformative experience. If it is impossible for me to know what it is like to have the transformative experience of seeing and touching my own child, to know what emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions will be caused by having a child, and by extension to know what is like to have the emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions caused by having a child, it is impossible for me to gauge the expected utility, in phenomenal terms, of having a child. If I cannot gauge the expected utility of having a child, I cannot compare this utility to the utility of remaining childless. And if I cannot compare it to the utility of remaining childless, I cannot—even approximately—determine which act would result in the highest expected utility. And thus, on the standard model, I cannot use our ordinary, phenomenal-based approach to rationally choose to have a child, nor to rationally choose to remain childless.

§7. *Objections.*¹¹

My conclusion is, obviously, controversial. The remainder of the paper will consist in a discussion of a variety of objections.

a. *Any choice is rational.* One might simply reject the standard model and hold that when agents in extremely impoverished epistemic circumstances cannot calculate their expected

¹¹ I'm indebted to Matt Kotzen here for discussion.

utilities, that any choice they make is rational. This would conflict with my conclusion, but it also does not damage the interest of the argument. Under this assumption about rational choice, the choice is rational, *but not for the right reasons*. The culturally accepted decision procedure uses a rough version of the standard model, presumably on the assumption that we are supposed to make the extremely important decision to have a child based on an accurate assessment of the phenomenal utility that having a child has for us. This is the sense in which we are supposed to make an “informed choice.” If, whatever we choose—to have a child or to not have a child—would be rational simply because we can have no idea what the expected utilities are, then this conclusion is as interesting and as controversial as my original conclusion.

b. *Objective chance?*

The source of the problem is the transformative nature of the experience of having a child. This experience is not projectable, and so makes it the case that the agent who is faced with such a choice faces a deep subjective unpredictability about the future. You might think that you could circumvent this problem by dispensing with projectability, choosing instead to have a child or not to have a child based on the objective chance that you’ll end up in a class of individuals who maximized their overall utility.

Let’s consider this possibility. Instead of making the choice based on what you think it’ll be like to have a child, you set aside your personal phenomenology and choose simply on the basis of the objective chance of being in a class of individuals who maximize their overall utility. When choosing, there are four classes you could end up in. I’ll name the class of individuals for whom, after having a child, the overall utility of having a child is higher than

it would have been if they had remained childless, *Lucky Parents*. I'll name the class of individuals for whom, after having a child, the overall utility of having a child is lower than it would have been if they had remained childless, *Unlucky Parents*. I'll call the class of individuals for whom, having decided to not have a child, the overall utility of the choice to be childless is higher than it would have been if they had had a child, *Lucky Child-frees*. Finally, the class I'll label *Unlucky Child-frees* is the class of individuals for whom, having decided to be childless, the overall utility of the choice to not have a child is lower than it would have been if they had had a child.

Now if Lucky Parents is much larger than Unlucky Parents, and Unlucky Child-frees is much larger than Lucky Child-frees, it might seem rational to choose to have a child, simply because you think, given the sheer numbers, if you have a child you are more likely to be in Lucky Parents, and you successfully avoid being classed in Unlucky Child-frees. And indeed, many people seem to assume something like the claim that Lucky Parents is much larger than Unlucky Parents, and that Unlucky Child-frees is much larger than Lucky Child-frees: they assume that people are made happier by having children and that childless people are unhappy because they do not have children of their own. However, the evidence strongly suggests that the popular assumption that most people are made happier overall by having children is false. While the highs seem to be higher for parents, the lows are lower, and measures of overall satisfaction strongly suggest that parents with children in the home have, on average, a much lower level of life satisfaction.¹² Moreover, individuals who have never

¹² Simon (2008), Evenson and Simon (2005).

had children report similar levels of life satisfaction as individuals with grown children who have left home.¹³

Finally, given the transformative nature of the experience of having a child, it is epistemically impossible for a person to determine whether the overall utility of the choice to be childless is higher than it would have been if she had had a child, or lower than it would have been if she had had a child. Therefore it is epistemically impossible to determine the relative sizes of Unlucky Child-frees and Lucky Child-frees. So choosing to have a child merely to maximize one's chances of having a higher overall utility is a bad strategy, and choosing to remain childless merely to maximize one's chances of having a higher overall utility is also a bad strategy.

It's also worth noting that, even if the facts were different, such that it was actually the case that Lucky Parents was much larger than Unlucky Parents and Unlucky Child-free was much larger than Lucky Child-free, if a person were to make a choice whether or not to have a child *based on these facts*, making one's choice this way strikes us as deeply wrong. Imagine Anne, who has never wanted children, deciding to have a child simply because she knows the objective distribution of the members of our four classes. To choose this way seems bizarre.

¹³ McClanahan and Adams (1989) describe how a number of studies “suggest that parenthood has negative consequences for the psychological well-being of adults.” The negative impact of children on happiness and life satisfaction has been widely discussed in sociology, psychology and economics. See, e.g., Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) and see Simon (2008) for a nice overall summary.

And the bizarreness of the idea of choosing in this way, I suggest, is derived from the cultural belief that one can somehow tell whether one will be happier or not if one has children, and the consequent belief that this is at least part of the right basis upon which to make the decision. So, given the standard model, even if we know the relative sizes of our four classes, we find ourselves in a dilemma: make the choice rationally, based only on the objective chance of ending up in a class of utility-maximizers, and ignoring what you personally think about whether you want to have a child, or do not make the choice rationally, instead taking into account your own beliefs and other inclinations. Neither horn is attractive.

c. Change the decision-theoretic method.

The standard model fits the ordinary structure of the decision-making process that prospective parents are, culturally speaking, supposed to undergo. Many people, myself included, take the standard model to be intuitively fitting and to provide the most natural model available for rational decision-making in this particular context (even if it gives us unsatisfactory results). However, it is well-known that decision-making under ignorance creates problems for the standard model, and so other models have been developed for agents to use.¹⁴ How does this fact affect the argument above?

In a nutshell: it doesn't. I argue that the way we ordinarily want to choose whether to have a child, that is, using a process that is a version of the standard model, does not permit us to rationally choose to have a child—or to rationally choose not to have a child. This result is

¹⁴ See, for example, Levi (1986) and Weirich (2004). Joyce (1999) and Hansson (ms) give excellent general discussions.

surprising. Presumably, it is surprising because the decision-making implications of the fact that the experience of having a child is transformative have not been fully recognized.

That said, the availability of other models as options is important, because it helps to develop the issue. So let's briefly assess some of the options. One option is to argue that we need to replace decision theory with an entirely different approach to rational agency.¹⁵ But it is not clear what such a model would be. Decision theory seems to provide us with the best models of rational agency we have.

Another option is to replace the standard model with a different decision-theoretic model, one which would apply under epistemically impoverished circumstances like the ones faced by prospective parents. What if we replaced the standard model with one of these alternatives?

The trouble with finding a replacement model is that agents' epistemic circumstances are so impoverished that it isn't clear there are any good alternatives for us to use. As the argument above makes clear, the central problem is that we cannot know the phenomenal outcomes of our choice, yet we are supposed to choose based on the utilities of these phenomenal outcomes. If this is the case, none of the alternative models will be of use, since they still assume we know what the outcomes are in order to rationally choose between them.

However, for the sake of argument, let's see how far we can go if we modify the context and assume, *per impossibile*, we can know the relevant possible phenomenal outcomes. So, for

¹⁵ Thanks to Trenton Merricks for making this suggestion.

example, we will suppose that the chooser knows what it would be like for her to experience the joy of holding her newborn infant in her arms, and she also knows what it would be like to feel disgust, shock and dismay as she confronts the drudgery of life as a new parent. So for the sake of argument we shall assume the chooser knows the possible outcomes involving what it's like for her to have a child, it's just she doesn't know how likely it is that she will instantiate any of these particular outcomes. Here, then, we have a level of ignorance where we know the relevant possible phenomenal outcomes, but we cannot assign probabilities to them. There are indeed alternative decision procedures designed for agents with this sort of ignorance.

If we replaced the standard model with one of these alternative decision procedures, then perhaps we could recover rationality. One alternative to the standard model uses a simple version of the "maximin" rule for making decisions. When "maximizing", the agent should decide conservatively, that is, make a safe bet, in order to minimize bad results. To use this decision procedure, we first determine the desirability and undesirability of each possible outcome. Then we choose the act whose worst outcome has the highest desirability relative to the worst outcomes of all the acts under consideration, that is we, choose the act with the "least bad" outcome.

But this isn't the only sort of model we could use. A different, more optimistic model uses a version of the "maximax" rule: calculate the desirability of each possible outcome, and then simply choose the outcome that has the highest level of desirability. That is, we "maximax" by choosing the act whose best outcome is the most desirable outcome. Either approach allows for rational decision-making under ignorance.

The main thing to notice, when considering the maximin and the maximax options, or indeed any option that proposes to replace the standard model with an alternative model, that even if we did succeed in using one of these models, and so made our choice rationally, using such a procedure seems bizarre by ordinary lights.

To see this, look more closely at how these different models are to be employed when we make the choice about having a child. By stipulation, we assume that all of the relevant outcomes are known. Let's say these outcomes range from the extremely undesirable experience of what it's like to have constant, severe depression, low life satisfaction, unhappiness due to financial difficulties, misery associated with divorce, and dying alone as the result of being alienated from one's child, to the extremely desirable experience of what it's like to have constant elation, high life satisfaction, happiness due to financial comfort (the child grows up to be a successful hedge-fund manager), the joy of a long and happy marriage and wonderful grandchildren, and the comfort of dying while attended by a loving adult son or daughter. Let's assume outcomes of the decision to not to have a child range from the moderately undesirable experience of what it's like to have constant mild boredom with occasional episodes of depression, moderate life satisfaction, the misery of divorce (your spouse wanted to have a child), and dying alone, to the highly desirable experience of what it's like to have regular bouts of elation, to experience high life satisfaction, and to enjoy financial stability, a happy marriage, and no regrets on one's deathbed. If these are the possible outcomes, every agent following the maximin rule should choose not to have a child, since on this scenario, not having a child is associated with the best of the worst possible outcomes. And every agent following the maximax rule should choose to have a

child, since on this scenario, having a child is associated with the best of the best possible outcomes.

In each case, the choice would count as rational. But a bit of inspection shows that, from the perspective of the ordinary way we choose to have a child or choose not to have a child, the reasons for each choice would seem bizarre.¹⁶ For, given that the agent has no access to the chances that she herself will experience any of these outcomes, no way of rationally making the choice can involve any assessment of them. Hence, the agent using the maximax rule is not choosing to have a child based on the thought that *she* is more likely to experience high life satisfaction and wonderful grandchildren, etc. That's not how the decision goes, for she has no access to her personal chances of having these experiences. Instead, she simply chooses, independently of whether she thinks she herself is likely to experience the best possible outcome, the choice with the best possible (phenomenal) outcome. This means that if she is following the maximax model, she should *always* choose to have a child. (Recall Anne, who has no desire to have a child: if she maximaxes, she should choose to have a child.) And the agent using the maximin rule is not choosing not to have a child based on the thought that *she* is more likely to experience severe depression or the like if she chooses otherwise. (Imagine another agent, Suzy, who thinks it would be wonderful to have a child: if she maximins, she should not choose to have a child.) This preserves the rationality of the choice at the cost of departing almost entirely from our cultural norms.

¹⁶ These models can be refined in subtle ways to improve their effectiveness in particular situations (as in Levi 1986). However, even with these improvements, we'd need to know the relevant outcomes in the first place, and the decision procedure would depart just as significantly from our ordinary decision-making process.

I conclude that, first, if we are to make a decision to have a child by assessing the utilities of our phenomenal outcomes, that our lack of epistemic access to these outcomes puts us in a state of such severe epistemic impoverishment that it prevents us from replacing the standard model with standard alternative models of choosing under conditions of ignorance.

Second, if we were to replace the standard model with alternatives where agents do not assess their personal phenomenal outcomes or the chances of such outcomes, that the choice to have a child, if it is to be rational, must occur in a way that is very different from how it is normally thought to occur. Perhaps we should conclude that an individual's family planning, to be rational, does need to occur very differently from how it ordinarily occurs. This may indeed be the right conclusion, and if so, it is an interesting and controversial implication of my argument. But it does not contradict the main point.

d. *Subjective rationality and objective rationality.*

Perhaps there is a different way to preserve the rationality of choosing whether to have a child. We might distinguish between a choice that is subjectively rational and a choice that is objectively rational, and hold that subjective rationality merely requires that an agent do the best she can rationally do, given the information she has to hand. The idea is that, even if agents have false beliefs about the expected utilities of their choices, as long as they choose the outcome that, consistent with their beliefs, seems to maximize expected utility, they are choosing (subjectively) rationally.

The problem with this response is that, while it is correct to say that agents who don't know any better (that is, they don't know that they cannot determine what it might be like for

them to have a child) can choose in a subjectively rational way whether to have a child, it does not affect the argument. For the argument is that the culturally accepted practice of choosing to have a child by assessing one's phenomenal preferences is not (even approximately) *objectively* rational, because the epistemic circumstances assumed by our ordinary practice do not actually obtain. Given the extremity of the agent's epistemic poverty when choosing whether to have a child, the choice is simply nothing like the sort of choice we thought it was.¹⁷

A different tack might be to hold that an agent can choose rationally in accordance with the standard model as long as she assigns values based only on the *true* information she has access to, choosing the outcome that maximizes utility given these assignments alone. This, alas, will get us no further than any of our other strategies, since agents choosing whether to have children lack any true information about their future phenomenal characters, and so however such a choice might be conducted, she will be unable to proceed in a way that even approximates the culturally accepted practice of choosing to have a child by assessing one's phenomenal preferences.

e. *Self-knowledge.*

¹⁷ Weirich (2004) discusses ways for agents to make subjectively rational decisions given nonideal circumstances, but the nature and severity of agents' epistemic poverty of our case creates special problems. If the subjectively rational version of choosing to have a child is to be made in a way that resembles the way the choice was to be made under the standard model, it requires the agent to have access to her phenomenal preferences (she has to have some ability to grasp the relevant phenomenal facts). As I've made clear, she lacks this access. It is not clear to me then, that in this case Weirich would think that we have enough epistemic access to the relevant facts to employ his subjective decision procedures. But even if there is a way to employ his procedures to decide subjectively rationally, we must choose between deciding without phenomenal information and so deciding bizarrely but (subjectively) rationally, or not deciding rationally.

The cultural belief about how one is supposed to proceed when making decisions about one's future family suggests that there is a slightly different way you could try to make the choice about children based on your chance of being in a particular class. This way relies on a combination of one's self-knowledge and the chanciness of a particular outcome.

Consider Suzy, who has wanted children ever since she started to babysit. Suzy grows up, finishes college, gets married, considers her options, and decides to have a baby. When she has her baby, the experience is as wonderful as she'd hoped it would be, and she is blissfully happy. Or consider Billy. Billy has wanted a family all his life. Without children, he feels that his life is meaningless, and that he could never be truly happy. He wants to grow old surrounded by his children and grandchildren. He gets married, considers his options, and decides to have a family. The experience is as wonderful as he'd hoped it would be, and he leads a happy life. Now consider Anne, who has never wanted children. She has a busy, successful and satisfying career, and she defines herself through her work and her accomplishments. Anne gets married, considers her options, and decides to not have a child. She leads a happy, productive, childless life.

One might think that Suzy, Billy and Anne each make their choice based on their estimation of which class they think they will be in. This estimation might be based partly on the (perceived) relative sizes of the classes, but it involves an important additional factor: one's self-knowledge. One uses one's self-knowledge of one's beliefs, emotions, desires, and dispositions to determine one's inclinations, and combines this with the chanciness of being in one class or another to rationally choose whether or not to have a child. Especially if the class sizes are roughly equal, this might seem to be a pleasantly rational approach.

This thought might be pleasant, but it is just a rehashing of the naïve approach described in *Scenario*. And so it won't work. Because of the transformative character of the experience of having a child, one lacks any of the requisite self-knowledge for determining the character of one's beliefs, emotions, desires, and dispositions after having a child. So one cannot project forward to determine the likelihood of one's being in one class versus another. Without the experience of having a child, one lacks the self-knowledge needed to eliminate the deep subjective unpredictability involved in the choice.

f. *Testimony*.

You might suspect that certain sorts of testimony could help with the problem of determining what sort of class you are likely to fall into. Perhaps your friends all have children, and you see how happy it makes them, and you think of yourself as relevantly similar to them, so you decide to have a child. Or perhaps you have a friend—or a parent—who was made miserable by having children, and you think of yourself as a similar sort of person, and so you decide not to have children.

But to think that that testimony allows you to make a rational choice is again to fall back into the naïve perspective we rejected at the start. Without just the sort of self-knowledge one gets from one's own experience of having a child, one can't know which sort of testimony is the sort you should rely on. In fact, testimony from new parents, the surprising facts about the prevalence of negative psychological consequences for parents, and the incidence of postnatal depression strongly suggest—again—that before having children, one simply doesn't know what sort of transformative experience one will have when one has a child.

Perhaps the transformative experience will be wonderful and raise the overall utility of having a child. But perhaps it will be miserable. And until we solve the problem of other minds, we don't know enough about the internal perspectives of other people to know whether they are perfectly similar to us in the respects that could justify an induction about what sort of transformative experience we'll have.

There is another problem with relying on parental testimony, for here is an interesting psychological fact about parents: once a person has had a child, it becomes psychologically very difficult for her to imagine and assess counterfactuals involving the possibility that she did not have that child, and thus to assess the relative values of the outcomes of having had that child versus never having had the child. This is a contingent fact about the psychological capacities of human parents, although it might extend to other sorts of transformative experiences. After the transformation has occurred, certain counterfactual psychological states become extremely difficult to assess. This undermines the value of any testimony where the parent claims she is happier now than she would have been if she had not had her child, simply because she cannot imagine life without her child.

Recognizing this fact is important for two reasons. First, it means that this sort of testimony should not be used to determine whether a parent is a member of Lucky Parents. Second, such testimony should not be thought to provide evidence in support of arguments against abortion.

g. The argument proves too much?

My argument generalizes: if I am right, we can't use the standard model to make decisions based on our phenomenal preferences for *any* transformative experience. Is this evidence that the argument cannot be right? For we make all sorts of choices where we lack phenomenal access to the future. And we make all sorts of choices using the standard model. Does my argument imply that none of these choices are rational? And if so, how can this possibly be correct?

First of all, we need to pin down the sort of choices the argument targets. They must be choices involving phenomenal transformation, they must use (an approximation of) the standard model, and they must be choices based on our phenomenal preferences. This narrows things down a bit.

Now let's look at some cases. Consider the choice to try a new dish at a restaurant. Does my argument imply that such a choice is not rational? My argument does imply that, if you you've never tasted anything similar to the new dish, that you can't use the standard model to choose rationally if you choose based on how you think the dish will taste.

Is this a problem for my argument? I don't really see that it is—maybe such a choice isn't rational. After all, the stakes are very low, so why does it matter much if we make choices like these in a non-rational way. But this isn't the only way to make the choice. You might make the choice without reflecting on it at all. Then the choice might not count as rational, but again since the stakes are so low, we don't really care.

However, I actually think that we tend to use other sorts of criteria when we choose to try new dishes. Perhaps you choose to try the tripe flambé simply because the waiter truthfully assures you that absolutely everyone who tries it, loves it. Or you might rationally choose the tripe flambé simply because you value new taste experiences. Here, you are not choosing on the basis of what you think it will taste like, but rather, on the basis that you'd like to have a new experience. (For similar reasons, you might choose to see red if you were black-and-white Mary.) Choosing in this case, that is, choosing merely on the presumed value of having a new experience, seems reasonable—again since the stakes are so low.

With low-stakes decisions, then, either the argument generalizes in a relatively harmless way, or it's relatively easy to make the choice rational in an acceptable way. But things are different for high-stakes choices. It's obvious that we don't think that choosing whether to have a child should be made solely on the presumed value of having a new experience, and that's partly because the stakes are so high. It isn't that we couldn't rationally choose to have a child based solely on the value of having a new experience, however bad or good it turns out—it's that this would not be a choice made for the right reasons.¹⁸ So I do think that the argument generalizes in a destructive way for high-stakes choices involving transformative experiences. Is this a problem for my argument?

I don't see how it is. Rather, it shows the importance of paying attention to combining choosing based on the expected value of phenomenal preferences with choices about transformative experiences. I focus on the case of having a child because this is a case that has wide appeal: many people make the choice to have or to forgo this transformative

¹⁸ Although, as it happens, certain insufficiently reflective decisions to have new experiences made in the heat of the moment do often lead to *having* a child.

experience. But the point is intended to be general, for having a child is only one sort of transformative experience. There are many others. For example, consider the experience of being at the front during wartime (think: the storming of Omaha Beach in the opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan*).¹⁹ If such an experience is transformative, as it likely is, it may not be possible for a new recruit to make a rational choice about whether to sign up for the military during wartime. (Assuming that the choice is not solely based on external factors like fulfilling one's patriotic duty.)

Other sorts of decisions that involve transformative experiences include those that involve radical sensory changes in individuals with disabilities. Consider a person who was blind from birth deciding whether to have an operation to be able to see, or a decision about whether one's child, who is deaf from birth, should have a cochlear implant (see Harman 2009 for an interesting discussion of the moral questions and political controversy surrounding the decision to give a deaf child a cochlear implant). Some advocates for the blind argue that there are negative utilities for blind people who become sighted, since the formerly blind person loses certain phenomenological capacities. And, as Harman (2009) details, some advocates for the deaf argue that there are negative utilities for deaf people who become hearers, since they lose certain unique experiences associated with being part of a deaf community. These advocates sometimes argue against individuals' having operations to make individuals sighted or to make them hearers.

My arguments connect to these debates. It suggests that the transformative nature of these sorts of experiences make it impossible to use the standard model to determine the overall

¹⁹ See Keegan (1976) and Fussell (1989) for eye-opening discussions of the horrific experiences of individual soldiers.

utilities of these acts, and thus that the debate over the decision procedure needs to reflect that fact. At the very least, we need further philosophical investigations into how the choice to radically change one's phenomenological capacities should be conducted and how this connects with charged political and cultural issues about sensory disabilities.

h. *Projectibility falsified?*

The examples of Suzy, Billy and Anne each have the following form: the agent reviews his or her options, makes a choice, and that choice seems to be confirmed by the high utility of the resulting outcomes. Do these cases constitute counterexamples to the thesis that one faces a deep subjective unpredictability when one contemplates having a child?

No. The fact that there is a high level of utility that results from the outcome of one's choice does not show that one can, after all, adequately project forward to determine the overall expected utility of one's choice. Suzy and Billy, if they are indeed members of the class Lucky Parents, made lucky guesses. Anne, if she is indeed a member of Lucky Child-frees, also made a lucky guess.

First, let's get the facts straight. It might seem obvious that Suzy and Billy are in the class Lucky Parents, while Anne is in the class Lucky Child-frees. But this is too quick. In fact, unless we can gauge the utilities for the converse of their choices, we cannot know which class they are in. That said, it is arguably the case that, after they have children, Suzy and Billy can reflect on how their lives were before they became parents, and decide whether they are in Lucky Parents or in Unlucky Parents. Once they have the knowledge that experience teaches, they may be able to determine which class they are in. So let's assume for the sake

of argument that Suzy and Billy are each in fact members of Lucky Parents. Anne, however, remains epistemically impoverished due to her lack of experience, and so she cannot determine whether she is in Lucky Child-frees or in Unlucky Child-frees.

Now, start with Suzy. Does her subsequent happiness confirm that she was able to know enough about what it would be like to have a child, before she had her child, to assess the expected utilities of the outcomes of her choice? No. What her happiness confirms is that, for her, having a child has a high utility. But simply discovering this after one has a child does not mean that before one has a child, one can determine that one is likely to be a member of Lucky Parents. The same argument holds for Billy. The difficulty with trying to determine which class one might be in is evident when we reflect on the high incidence of postnatal depression among new parents: one widely cited reason for postnatal depression is that a new parent failed to recognize what it was really like to be a parent (and is subsequently shocked, may even think that they have made a huge mistake, and so on, and gets depressed as a result).²⁰

Anne's case is slightly different. Here, all that is confirmed is that she is a member of a class of individuals for whom the overall utility of not having a child is high. Since there is no information available for how, after the transformative experience of having a child, her beliefs and other mental states would have changed, this fact does not confirm projectability.

In short, the agents were able to have outcomes with high utilities, but this does not mean that they did not face deep subjective unpredictability, or even that they maximized their

²⁰ Estimates for the incidence of postnatal depression vary wildly, with some projections as high as 50% of new mothers and 15% of new fathers qualifying as depressed due to postnatal effects.

utilities. Given the transformative nature of the experience of having a child, their choices were lucky rather than rational. Many people are very happy after having children, and many people are very happy to remain childless. Such happiness does not confirm projectability, nor does it make their decisions to procreate or not into rational decisions.

Conclusion.

I've argued that, before a person has a child, she or he cannot know what it would be like to have a child. This is because the experience of having a child is transformative, that is, it is a unique and distinctive experience that has significant effects on one's phenomenology, and gives us a special kind of knowledge, a kind of self-knowledge that we cannot get by any other means. Without this knowledge, we are epistemically impoverished when we choose whether or not to have a child, and we face a deep subjective unpredictability about the future. So, before performing the act of having a child, we cannot determine the overall expected utility of the act of having a child, and hence we cannot determine which act has the greatest utility. As a result, , we cannot use the standard model to rationally choose to have a child. Nor can we use it to rationally choose to not have a child.

The conclusion one draws from this argument varies depending on one's account of the nature of rational choosing. If the fact that we cannot determine the overall expected utilities of the options we are choosing between means that, if we choose, we make an irrational choice, then it is irrational to choose to have a child, and it is irrational to choose to not have a child. If the fact that we cannot determine the overall expected utilities of the options we are choosing between means that, if we choose, we are making an arational choice or that we

are not “choosing” in any strict sense, then the conclusion is that one cannot rationally to choose to have a child, nor can one rationally choose to not have a child.

I briefly explored ways to make the choice rational, if we want to make it so. These ways suggest that perhaps we should be thinking of the choice of whether to have a child as simply a choice to try a new, extended life experience of an unknown sort. Or perhaps we should be thinking of the choice of whether to have a child as simply a “leap in the dark,” or make it based on a coin toss (... heads, baby, tails, no baby...). Or perhaps we need an entirely different approach. Space prevents me from taking up this interesting issue in further detail here.

In any case, contrary to popular opinion and common sense, contrary to what your parents might tell you, and contrary to the picturesque ideal romanticized by many a chick-lit novel, life coach website, and fashion magazine, given the standard model, one cannot—even approximately—rationally choose to have a child. And, given the standard model, contrary to what those who are committed exclusively to their careers, or who dislike being around the children of other people, or who value their lazy weekends might believe, one cannot rationally choose to remain childless.

How could common sense about the right approach to family planning have gotten things so wrong? I suspect that the popular conception of how one is to make the decision to have a child stems from the twentieth and twenty-first century ideal of personal psychological development through choice. That is, a modern upper middle class conception of self-realization involves the notion that one achieves a kind of maximal self-fulfillment through

making rational choices about the sort of person one wants to be.²¹ (The rhetoric of the debate over abortion and medical advances in contraceptive technology have probably also contributed to the framing of the decision to have a child as a rational choice based on one's phenomenological preferences.) While the notion of fulfillment and personal definition through choice might be apt for how one chooses to eat, what one chooses to do for a living, what music one listens to or whether one does yoga, it is not apt for the choice of whether or not to have a child.

The *prima facie* appeal of the suggestion that making a choice based on testimony alone could be rational connects to my suspicion that contemporary cultural norms have created this epistemic situation. In the past, external facts and circumstances played a much larger role in the causal process leading up to parenthood. Before contraceptive devices were widely available, you didn't choose to have a child based on what you thought it would be like. Often, if you were sexually active, you or your partner simply got pregnant or didn't get pregnant. And to the extent you actively tried to choose to have children, often it was because you needed an heir, or needed more hands to work the farm, or whatever.

My view is not that it is right or wrong to have children, or that people should not be happy with their choice, whatever choice they make. My view is simply that we need to be honest with ourselves about the basis for this choice. For example, when surprising results surface about the negative satisfaction that many parents get from having children, telling yourself that you *knew* you would not be among that class of parents, and that's why you chose to

²¹ See Zelizer (1985): the classic account of how children have come to be regarded as emotionally priceless.

have a child, is simply a rationalization—in the worst sense—of your act. One can be happy that one has a child, or happy that one is childless, without wrapping that happiness in a cloak of false rationalization.

My argument also has consequences for those who want to be able to physically conceive, carry and give birth to a child, but are unable to do so. If these agents want to have a child because they think having a child will maximize their personal preferences, and as a result of their inability to have a child they experience deep sadness, depression, or other negative emotions, my argument implies that their response is not objectively rational. This is disturbing, but it is true. Such a response is not objectively rational. That does not mean the response is wrong, or blameworthy, or subjectively unreasonable.

Finally, the discussion raises a larger issue for those interested in making sense of the ordinary way we make decisions, one that derives from the importance of how certain kinds of knowledge require experience. The sort of knowledge that experience brings, phenomenal knowledge, is hugely important in many of our most important personal decisions. Any experience that changes the self enough to create deep subjective unpredictability creates significant trouble for an account of ordinary personal decision-making that fails to take this possibility into account.

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