Laurie Paul, in her book *Transformative Experience*, raises a problem for rational deliberation. Transformative choices – where our decisions might result in life situations that are too alien for us to be able to imagine from the inside – are in many cases not possible to make rationally. The problem is not simply incomplete information that could be remedied with more information. The problem is that the values of many things are grounded in our experience of them and so we can’t estimate their value before we had experienced them at least once. Because of this, our decisions about such cases will often not conform to the normative standard laid out in decision theory. This, she argues, holds for decisions like having a child, choosing a profession, and many others.

There is an anecdote involving a famous decision theorist where he had to make an important decision. He agonized over it for days and weeks and finally his students asked why he doesn’t simply make a decision matrix and follow the results. He answered: “but this is serious!” Jokes aside, in this paper I want to argue that rational deliberation has limited usefulness in guiding us to a good life, not only under circumstances where we cannot conform to the normative standard, but also under circumstances where we can – when we are well informed, know the values of the expected outcomes and aware of our own values and preferences.

There is a line of thought, also mentioned by Laurie in her book, according to which purely rational decision making might strike people as in some ways oppressive and against their own self-understanding as agents.
As Dostoyevsky explains in *Notes from the Underground*,

there is one case, and only one, when a man can consciously and purposely desire for himself what is positively harmful and stupid... and that is when he claims the right to

...not be bound by the obligation of wanting only what is sensible...And in particular it may be the greatest of all benefits ... because it does at any rate preserve what is dear and extremely important to us, that is our personality and our individuality.

Though Dostoyevsky’s problem has some echoes in the one I wish to raise here, it is not the same. The problem I want to raise is that on many occasions it is rational to refrain from rational deliberation altogether. In other words, under certain circumstances – which might occur, for some of us, quite frequently – the act of engaging in rational deliberation might be itself irrational. If this is right, it would show us the limitations – not of reason per se – but reasoning as a tool to guide us to a good life. To explicate this claim, I will appeal to a distinction Kierkegaard made between subjective and objective orientations to the world and ourselves; which in turn depend on a distinction between more or less objective and subjective conceptions and states of mind.

I Objective and Subjective

This distinction, as also articulated by Thomas Nagel in a number of articles, tracks the degree to which concepts abstract away and are removed from experience. This – unlike other famous accounts of mental division, such as Plato’s, Freud’s or those of modern cognitive science between controlled and automatic mental states – is not a binary distinction; our mental states
constitute a continuum along which they differ in how objective or subjective their conception is. Scientific concepts are the most objective but many of our everyday concepts are also of the more objective variety. Conceptions that are closely tied to sense experience and perception, on the other hand, are more subjective. On the one end of the spectrum is the quantum-physicist’s thoughts about strings or the wave-function; on the other is the meditator aware of her experiences.

Kierkegaard suggested that the mind oscillates between these two primary orientations to the world: objective and subjective – and their balance determines what kind of a person we are going to be. Objectivity is an orientation that tends to relate to the world by abstracting away, in various degrees, from subjective experience, and from individual points of view. A subjective orientation, on the other hand, is based on an attunement and direct reflection on the inner experience of feeling, sensing, thinking and valuing that unfolds in our day-to-day living. It is the difference between an abstract, objective conception of water as a potable liquid that is also found in lakes, rivers and oceans, and the subjective concept of it based on what it is like to drink it or swim in it in this particular moment and place.

An objective orientation that abstracts away from lived experience, however, is not the same as being objective in the normative sense. You can have an objective orientation in the sense of mostly approaching reality in an abstract, conceptual way, but still be biased or uninterested in facts and evidence, even be on an outright campaign denying obvious facts, be full of contradictions and utterly irrational. Objectivity as an epistemic norm can be separated from objectivity as a primarily conceptual, abstract orientation to the world. Normative objectivity,
requiring respect toward evidence, logic, and reason, is the virtue that represents excellence in one's objective orientation to life, and is best embodied in science and rational decision making. In fact, the term “subjective” is sometimes used – in contrast with my use of the term is this essay – to describe a certain deficiency in this virtue; a self-centered bias in one's relationship to evidence and belief. President Trump’s belief, for example, that his crowd sizes exceeded all previous inauguration crowds is subjective in this sense; not in the sense of being based on reflection on lived experience.

II Either/or

The advance of science and industry, and the rise of Enlightenment rationality in the last four hundred years has slowly weakened subjectivity and created a culture that offers less and less incentive to deepen one's inner life. The success of projects that embody objectivity in the normative sense encourage a generally objective orientation in a non-normative sense as well. It created circumstances that have little room for silence and increasingly invite noise and constant action. Consequently, fewer of us live thoroughly immersed in life's experience and more of us are grasping it through abstractions, all the ways our culture conceptually frames our existence as individuals, Democrats and Republicans, man and women, one percenters and workers, consumers, immigrants, and so on. The spectacular success of the physical sciences in the last centuries has raised hopes that science also holds the key to the investigation of human life and achievement of happiness. And there is no denying that it does, to a certain degree: we
know, from psychology and neuro-science, a lot more about the causes and conditions of happiness than we had before.

But there is a line of thought in philosophy and the literary tradition that runs counter to the optimism of enlightenment rationalism that hopes to solve social problems, and better individual lives via rational enquiry and deliberation. According to this line of thought, our experience of life matters in ineffable ways that an objective understanding of the world simply cannot capture. Much of Kierkegaard’s philosophy is a warning against the tendency to take an increasingly objective stance. By mistakenly taking our objective understanding as our only connection to reality we make our world less rich. By becoming less subjective, we cut ourselves off from sources of meaning and value. This line of thought holds that a principal source of significance is subjective experience and that human beings cannot thrive without an orientation towards, and engagement with, the subjective experience of their lives, and that, as a matter of fact, a predominantly objective, conceptual orientation to oneself is detrimental to well-being.

As Kierkegaard puts it, “the way is to become subjective, to become a subject.”¹ One might wonder how one can become subjective; as a matter of fact, how one can fail to be subjective. Subjectivity is the total quality of feeling, sensing, experiencing thinking and valuing that unfolds in our day-to-day living; it seems to be a given that we all have these subjective experiences, that our lives are automatically subjective, all the time. However, as Kierkegaard points out, the mind can flee its own subjectivity; can escape into alienation. Instead of

cultivating presence and awareness of one’s subjective existence, one can escape into theorizing, and live one’s life by abstract principles and standards.

The cultivation of subjectivity – similarly to the cultivation of objectivity in the normative sense – requires a certain amount of self-denial: it requires the acceptance of one’s inner world as it is, with all the pain it contains, instead of seeing and presenting it in the most pleasant and flattering light. This runs against strong forces of human nature. As Freud pointed it out, repression and denial are just the most obvious in a varied and intricate repertoire of self-deception. Art and literature at their best are attempts to break through this self-deception. Contemplative traditions and psychology both developed sophisticated mental techniques to do this and in that they embody the virtues of subjectivity.

We of course oscillate between subjective and objective orientations. We can dwell on the subjective features of our experience, our memories, plans, phantasies, etc. or, alternatively, we can abstract away from them and instead dwell in the thoughts that accompany them. Here is my point: whether to become more or less subjective is also a choice, and one with enormous ramifications for one’s life and well-being. It is a choice most often made unconsciously, as a culmination of little habits of mind. But it can be made consciously as well. And according to Kierkegaard, it is the most important decision of them all.

III Subjectivity, objectivity and decision making

Where does decision making fall on the objective/subjective divide? I propose that what we normally consider decision making, that is, conscious, purposeful deliberation about possible courses of action in light of goals, values and expected outcomes, generally falls on the objective
side of the divide, even when the deliberations involve some subjective values presented in experiential terms (e.g., what it is like to be in a certain situation). What is involved in decision making (presenting various outcomes, making inferences, etc.) typically requires high level of abstraction; but decision making falls on the objective side of the divide also because the type of mental processes (making inferences, finding connections, etc.) crowd out the more contemplative states of awareness involved in more subjective states of mind.

So, in other words, when you chose to be more or less subjective, you also decide how much of your life you want to devote to conscious planning, optimizing your life in the near and far term through deliberation. You make a second order decision on decision making, as an activity. If you chose to become more subjective, for example, there will be less deliberation, less optimization, and more immersion in experience. Of course, you will still have to make plenty of decisions. Children need to be taken care of, dinner has to be made, summer plans have to be worked out. But still, there will be fewer deliberations, and there will be more spontaneity and process to it.

As Kierkegaard emphasized, decision making is not some abstract happening outside of the lived world. When we are deliberating, we are not merely sitting on the sidelines of our lives evaluating future alternatives, the deliberation itself being exempt from contributing to the quality (or lack thereof) of it. Making a decision is itself an act, part of the great stream of life. And as such, it could be deliberated about. Decision theory has to include in its scope decision making itself; like a snake biting its tail. When judging excessive decision making as irrational, the very act of rendering that verdict might be irrational, according to that same verdict.
It is not only Kierkegaard who cautions against an overly objective orientation to life and the self. Buddhist psychology also holds that a preoccupation with the self, an orientation toward planning and optimizing one’s life is based on a misunderstanding about the nature of the self. We orient toward planning and the promotion of our self because – to put it a bit overly succinctly - we do not want to accept the impermanence of our condition, the unpredictability of the future and our basic lack of control over it. But the very activities that are supposed to promote our happiness make it impossible to achieve real happiness and harmony with our life.

The Tibetan meditation master, Chogyam Trungpa says:

Free passion is radiation without a radiator, a fluid, pervasive warmth that flows effortlessly. It is not destructive because it is a balanced state of being and highly intelligent. Self-consciousness inhibits this intelligent, balanced state of being. By opening, by dropping our self-conscious grasping, we see not only the surface of an object, but we see the whole way through. We appreciate not in terms of sensational qualities alone, but we see in terms of whole qualities, which are pure gold. — Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, “Love Story”

Buddhist training involves practicing awareness of our experience without turning away from any aspect of it or trying to change it to something else. One way in which this contributes to the good life is that attention amplifies the qualities of experience and makes us aware of aspects of it that we were previously unaware of. So it can be considered a path toward more subjectivity in Kierkegaard’s sense. But as Trungpa seems to indicate, it also benefits us by making us drop “our self-conscious grasping”. There is a trade-off between subjective engagement and conscious planning. More subjective engagement lessens one’s need and
inclination to engage in planning. The relationship also seems to work in the other way. Turning away from subjectivity can result in a quality of drivenness and striving, an overabundance of calculation and decision making.

Another feature of a generally subjective orientation is that, as Trungpa claims, it results in more spontaneous, but appropriate and wholesome behavior. This idea is echoed by a common trope in the Western literary tradition, according to which the conscious will – deliberation guided by reason – is both a curse and a blessing. It seems to be our highest faculty, to be used for good or ill; but it is also the source of a particular kind of disgrace – or rather, lack of grace. As Heinrich von Kleist points out in his short story “On the Marionette Theater”, the conscious effort to succeed can be the death of innocence and genuine charm; the ruin of the dancer and the actor; more generally, can cause any of us to seem stilted and inauthentic – as the political arena amply testifies. From Homer to Dante, many thinkers observed that our best often comes when we do not deliberate. As Dostoyevsky says in Notes from the Underground, “reason is a good thing, that can’t be disputed, but reason is only reason and satisfies only man’s intellectual faculties, while volition is a manifestation of the whole of life.”

Decisions fast and slow

In terms of our decisions, we can also frame them more subjectively, or more objectively. For one thing, as Laurie pointed out, many important life decisions involve subjective values that depend on what it is like to be in that situation. So one should try to frame the decision accordingly, in partly subjective terms. But there is also a more radical sense in which the decision process might be subjective as opposed to objective. It is slow as opposed to fast. An
objective process is deliberative, driven by inference and calculation, the conscious weighing of reasons; it is relatively fast. It doesn’t take weeks or months to complete. A subjective process involves more than deliberation; it is slow and patient. In a slow, subjective decision process one allows oneself to live with the question for a while, to dwell in experience long enough for one's feelings about the decision to emerge.

In real life, we are rarely in a position to know our minds about an issue. We are often not aware of our desires and preferences; we frequently struggle to understand our own values, or struggle with the values we actually have. We are often don't conform to them. Our minds are difficult to understand and difficult to tame. Though deliberation presupposes that we have solved these problems, it doesn’t contribute to their resolution. Slow decision making involves a process of self-discovery and a willingness to engage with one’s experience. The Chinese book of divination, the I Ching, guides decisions not by providing practical solutions, but by offering an opportunity to contemplate one’s mind in a open-ended, experiential manner. Sensitivity to experience can bring about gradual transformation in an indirect, but deep way. It can also lead to better decisions with time. By contrast, conscious decisions made in haste are often ineffective in bringing about the change they seek. New Year’s resolutions are a case in point.

Decisions sometimes happen as a result of familiar considerations presenting themselves over and over again – as, for example, in the case of having to deal with an untrustworthy friend or lover. One might have understood, in an abstract sense, what is happening, and may have been at the point of trying to draw the consequences. However, often it takes a peculiar process of
allowing yourself to fully experience your friend’s behavior – putting aside any effort to find excuses – before one is able to act. As Kierkegaard puts it in *Either/Or*,

> For one may have known a thing many times and acknowledged it ... and yet it is only by the deep inward movements, only by the indescribable emotions of the heart, that for the first time you are convinced that what you have known belongs to you ... for only the truth that edifies is truth for you.

Many or most of the important decisions, I think, happen in this way. Having a child, moving to another country, breaking up, marrying, having a new direction in one’s career...they are not the result of conscious deliberation, for the most part. But these decisions are made somehow. And while Laurie is right, that these decisions often cannot be decided rationally, many people don’t even try. They try, however, to discover which way their heart pulls them. Such decisions are often more a discovery then deliberation. Whether slow decisions, made in the right way, tend to make us happier is an open question. But they lead to a more authentically lived life.

**Summary**

I have examined the role of rational deliberation in the good life. I have argued that excessive reliance on deliberation and planning is counterproductive; that a more subjective, experiential orientation is more conducive to happiness. But I do not by any means take this to be an argument for irrationality, or carelessness in deliberations we face either by necessity or by choice. There is a wave of irrationalism in politics; on the right it mostly takes the form of self-
serving distortion of facts; on the left it is the fetishizing of one’s own feelings, or the feelings of a group of victimized people as the highest arbiter of moral truth. I am wholeheartedly for rationality in politics. I am also for rationality in personal life; in any case, certainly against irrationality in one’s deliberation. It is just that I hold that figuring out what might be most rational to do is, under many circumstances, not a rational thing to do.

In politics, objectivity has been associated with Enlightenment rationality, and subjectivity with romantic anti-Enlightenment thought. A commitment to facts and reason in politics is without a doubt the basis of a decent society. Normative objectivity has proven itself powerful and inspiring tool in fighting authoritarianism and dictatorship – an example of this is anti-communist resistance in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union from the 1960s on. Subjectivity, on the other hand, has a dark underbelly that manifests in the oppressive political thought of even the greatest thinkers of subjectivity, such as Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and especially, Heidegger. Orienting towards subjectivity is not without its dangers. But a discussion of those is outside of the scope of this paper.