Either/or: Subjectivity, Objectivity and Value

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“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.”
William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

In this paper, I argue that experience is crucial to the apprehension of value. Along the way, I distinguish between two different kinds of concept, two different kinds of thought and two different kinds of mental process in terms of their connection to experience; these two kinds are subjective and objective. I suggest that entertaining subjective concepts, thoughts and mental processes which are closely intertwined with experience is essential for coming to know what one values and orienting towards it; an important part of decision making. (I want to note at the outset that by ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ I do not mean the familiar epistemological distinction that associates subjectivity with bias and motivated thought and objectivity with the standards of rationality.)

Let me first explain the distinction as it applies to concepts. In an important article, Thomas Nagel (1979) spells out the difference in concepts in the following way. A concept is subjective if it is closely tied to perceptual or sensory experience. Examples are introspective concepts, such as the concept of feeling cold that I can form as I am undergoing the experience, perceptual demonstratives (‘that beautiful thing’), or recognitional concepts (‘rainbow’, ‘blood’, etc.). Subjective concepts can only be acquired and used by subjects that are familiar with the experiences involved, who know, in Nagel’s expression, “what it’s like” to have these experiences. A blind person, for example, cannot form a subjective concept of red as it presupposes a familiarity with how red appears.

On the other hand, even blind people can acquire the concept of red as a certain kind of light reflectance; this concept is objective. Objectivity is marked by abstraction from sensory and perceptual sources of information. Concepts like ‘citizen’, or ‘collateral damage’ are objective; as are

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2 This distinction goes back at least to the philosophies of Descartes and Kant. It has been recently discussed by Brian Loar (1987, 1995, 1997, 2003) and Thomas Nagel (1974, 1979, 1986), among many others.
concepts such as ‘charge’, ‘electron’, ‘logarithm’, etc. which are the farthest removed from experiential concepts. Intelligent creatures with a very different sensorium might not share any of our subjective concepts while they could well entertain our more abstract ones. ‘Objective’ and ‘subjective’ does not denote a binary difference between concepts; rather, it denotes a continuum from more subjective to more objective, with perceptual demonstratives providing the subjective pole, and the concepts in mathematics and fundamental physics providing the objective pole.

Recently Laurie Paul, in her book *Transformative Experience*, argued forcefully that engaging in subjective thinking – i.e., thinking involving subjective concepts – is indispensable for evaluating possible scenarios, and that because of this, we need to substantially rethink our understanding of decision making. By way of introduction, I would like to place my ideas in the context of Paul’s work on decision making.

Paul introduces the concept of transformative decision – a decision at least one of whose outcomes involves a “transformative experience”. A transformative experience is both epistemically transformative in that it involves experience hitherto unknown to the subject, which, as a result of undergoing the experience, will become familiar to them; and personally transformative in that it substantially changes the subject’s values and aspirations. The more radically life-altering the decision is – think of, for example, having a child – the harder to imagine what life will be like afterwards, the harder it is to have a subjective conception of what life with a child involves. Ahead of the decision, Paul says, one has no way of forming a subjective concept of the emotional bond that will develop, or of the intense focus on one’s child that will replace one’s former free-wheeling existence. Moreover, Paul thinks (2015, p.12) that experience has subjective value, grounded in the phenomenal character of the experience, which needs to be taken into account in any decision involving the subject, and which, similar to the phenomenal character of the experience, can only be properly grasped subjectively. This holds generally, in that subjective value in general can only be properly grasped by those that have had the relevant experience. But it has particular consequences for transformative decisions.

In the case of transformative decisions, she argues, one cannot be both rational and authentic. Authenticity requires that one is able to grasp the relevant subjective values from one’s own point of view, that is, in subjective terms that alone can fully reveal their significance for the subject. A
rational assessment of the values of outcomes in a transformative decision would have to include in its purview the subjective values of the experiences involved, and so, even if one were able to receive objective information about those subjective values (say, from statistical evidence) one would not be able to make the decision authentically as one has never had the experiences necessary to form the appropriate subjective concepts of those values.

I share Paul’s concern with the role of subjective thought in grasping values. But my focus is not on decision making itself but on the role subjective thought plays in the process of coming to know what one values in general – a precondition of making rational decisions, identifying and moving towards meaningful projects and relationships. As Talbot Brewer (2009) observes:

[Some] conceptions [of decision making] encourage the thought that one’s outlook on value ought rationally to be complete and determinate before one begins the work of deliberation about particular cases. They provide no insight into the most fundamental work of deliberation, which is the formation and revision of a tenable conception of the good. Instead, they reduce deliberative rationality to skill in estimating probabilities and performing calculations. But the work of proper deliberation is not the work of an accountant. It is the work of a seeker after the good, and it often requires a fresh straining to form a more just and palpable sense of the goods bearing on one’s ongoing activities. (p. 103)

Paul thinks about experience as itself having what she calls subjective value. Eating kiwi is a good thing because the experience of eating kiwi has value for me. I suggest that the main contribution of the experiential life to the evaluative life is not that experience itself is valuable, but that it represents, in addition to perceptual properties, values properties as well. We come to appreciate the value of things, activities and people, their appeal, their depth and significance, etc. – wholly or partly – in our everyday phenomenal experience. This is not to deny that experience has value in itself – pleasure and pain are obvious examples. But – pace hedonistic utilitarianism – pleasure is not the sole, or even the main kind of good in the world. It is the flower that is beautiful, not my experience of it, though the experience has some value in itself as well.

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3 Johnston (2001) has a similar view. See also Noordhof 2018.
4 By phenomenal experience here I mean sensory, perceptual as well as emotional states. Though I think intentional states such as beliefs, etc. have their own distinctive phenomenology they don’t count as experiences in the way I intend to use the term here.
5 For a powerful argument against hedonism see Robert Nozick’s (1974).
I first I outline the view that values are represented in experience. Next, I provide an expanded account of subjective thought. In the final section, I elaborate on the thesis that cultivating subjective thought is necessary in the pursuit of the good.

1. Value and experience

“Contemplated by different people, [the] same glass can be a thousand things, however, because each man charges what he is looking at with emotion, and nobody sees it as it is but how his desires and state of mind… see it.” (Luis Buñuel 1958)

“All primordial comportment toward the world….is a primordial emotional comportment of value-ception.” (Max Scheler 1916/1973, p. 229)

I will now make some fairly general remarks about value and experience. I am going to be only as specific as is necessary to establish the significance of subjective thought in our evaluative lives. I propose that in perception, our experience represents evaluative properties as well as strictly perceptual ones. There is a distinction between the perceptual/sensory aspects of experiential content, and its affective aspects. In this view, more is presented in, say, a visual experience than the standardly agreed upon perceptual properties, such as color, shape, illumination, motion, their co-instantiation in objects, etc. The flower appears to me pale blue, fragrant, with a sharply defined shape; it also appears delicate, refreshing and delightful. Such sensuous features give the world its significance at the most fundamental level. Freshness or beauty is as much part of the content of my experience of the flower as is its color and shape. In experience, we grasp the fully determinate versions of determinables such the beautiful, the kitschy, the subline and the horrific, the appealing and repulsive. Intuitively, such values can only be grasped by people who have experienced instances of them. Johnston calls these “inherently sensuous” values. Some philosophers hold that in addition to the inherently sensuous ones, broadly moral values, such as kindness, probity, or shiftiness are also represented in perception.

On the other hand, some philosophers hold that values are represented not in sensory/perceptual

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6 For arguments that perceptual experience represents “higher level” properties, such as natural kinds, or causal relations, see Siegel (2006), Block (2014).
experience, but in the emotions that attend them. This is most plausible for the moral realm, with e.g., anger, resentment, or love representing their objects as offensive, despicable, or desirable.\(^9\) One might argue that even sensuous values, such as beauty or ugliness are represented in the attending “aesthetic emotions” and not in the perceptual experience itself.

It is hard to adjudicate this question as perception and affect is closely intertwined in experience. I want to be non-committal about this issue, and only claim that there is, as Scheler calls it, ‘value-ception’, i.e., that value is represented experientially, in the broad sense that includes emotions and sentiment. In any case, the evaluative aspect of experience is often quite salient. But even when that is not the case, even when it is not obvious or easy to discern, it is still present. Perhaps all normal experience has an evaluative component – things don’t tend to be experienced as entirely neutral.\(^10\)

Are all values apt to be represented in experience? For example, can values such as the revelatory power of conceptual art, or the wrongness of perjury experienced? Take the case of witnessing perjury while – through simultaneous fact checking – one is also aware that this is indeed perjury. There might be – if one is well-brought up – an immediate, felt sense of wrongness to one’s apprehension of the situation. But is this “felt sense” an experience? On the one hand, it might be that a conceptual grasp of the fact that one is witnessing perjury penetrates one’s (perceptual or emotional) experience\(^11\), and produces a phenomenal representation of wrongness.\(^12\) But it might also be that grasping the wrongness of perjury requires conceptual thought.\(^13\) I will not take up this issue. Either way, I maintain that a broad range of values are represented in experience.\(^14\)

On the other hand, could values be adequately grasped in objective thought as well? To the degree that this was the case, subjective thought about values would be dispensable. To bring the issues into

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\(^9\) See, e.g., Döring (2003).

\(^10\) I also wish to remain neutral about a host of meta-ethical questions about the nature of value. Any meta-ethical position that is compatible with the claim that value is represented in experience – and, as will argue later, that it could not be represented in thought in the absence of evaluative experience – will do.

\(^11\) For an account of cognitive penetration in the moral case, see Cowan (2015).

\(^12\) One of the main arguments for the perceptual representation of higher-level properties is the Contrast Argument (see Siegel (2006). For an application in the aesthetic case see Stokes 2018.

\(^13\) Lyons (2018), e.g., thinks that this felt sense is actually something post-perceptual, a perceptual seeming state which has experiential phenomenal character and conceptual content.

\(^14\) There is good reason to think that the range of values that can be represented in experience is fairly wide. It seems plausible to assume that the many species of mammals that can discern love, harm, untrustworthiness or unfairness – and which are capable of empathy, reconciliation or disapproval (see De Waal 2006) – do so through conscious perception or emotion rather than conceptual thought.
focus, consider the following thought experiment. In a twist on Frank Jackson’s famous Knowledge Argument, imagine that there is a person we might call Insensate Mary, whose experience, though it has the same sensory/perceptual content as ours, lacks an affective aspect altogether.

The thought-experiment relies on the idea that we can conceive of an experience that has perceptual content but lacks affective content altogether. It seems likely that these aspects can vary somewhat independently. We all experienced walking the same streets or looking at the same objects experiencing them wildly differently depending on our mood, or general state of mind. What was drab and uninspiring one day might be exciting another day. An even more suggestive example is the way morphine affects pain; apparently it leaves the sensory content intact but removes the affective component, the awfulness of pain. Whether or not that is indeed the case, however, and so whether or not the two aspects of experiential content can really come apart, it seems possible to conceive that they do.

I do not want to grant Insensate Mary superhuman knowledge in objective terms either – to ponder the abilities of such a creature would be irrelevant for my inquiry which centers on the lives of humans. Insensate Mary is quite normal in her abilities to reason in objective terms but – unlike Jackson’s Mary – has never experienced the myriad determinate ways in which something can be beautiful, or scary, or desirable. She cannot know about these things from the first person perspective, she cannot think about them subjectively.

But could it turn out that these values are not “inherently” sensuous, that she could still form some other, objective conception of them, adequate for the purposes of practical engagement? This doesn’t seem to be possible. Just as a painter’s thinking about color needs to be based on their experience of color – a blind painter can’t have grasp of color adequate for their practical engagement of it on canvas – they cannot be insensate either.

Here is why. Imagine that I had a twin whose tastes and evaluative dispositions with regard to the sensuous values are identical to mine. Even so, it would do me no good to defer to her to make beauty judgments, say, about a work of art I haven’t seen, or a new garden in the neighborhood that

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15 Jackson (1982).
I don’t want to bother to visit, as those judgments wouldn’t reflect my actual take on the world. Since such a deferential judgment would not be based in a sensuous grasp of an instance of a fully determinate version of the beautiful, my use of the concept beauty would lack authority. If Mary could somehow form, on the basis of third person information, e.g., the concept of beauty*, that would not be a genuine value concept, fit for practical activity. If she were to paint beautiful paintings, that would not be an authentic achievement, as it would not have been driven by her response to the intrinsic value of beauty. Sensuous values can be authentically, properly grasped only through subjective experience – through the visceral experiences of attraction and recoil they produce in us. There is no objective shortcut to basic judgments of sensuous values. Affective insensitivity cannot be compensated by objectivity.

How about the more abstract, objective value concepts such as justice or fairness? I suggest that Insensate Mary – lacking a sensuous appreciation of the world – lacks the necessary basis to form any evaluative concepts at all. It seems intuitively compelling to think that nothing could have significance or meaning for a creature who lacked the basic experience of attraction and recoil.

2. Contemplation and subjective thinking

“the way…is to become subjective, …to become subject.”
(Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript)17

In the following pages, I develop an account of subjective thought to provide a psychological framework in which to understand what Brewer calls the “formation and revision of a tenable conception of the good”. In many of his religious writings,18 Kierkegaard discusses, either implicitly or explicitly, the difference between a subjective and objective thinker.19 He uses the term ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ to demarcate more than just a difference in two styles of conceptual thought. He seems to imply that mere conceptual thought – even subjective conceptual thought – doesn’t make a thinker subjective. A subjective thinker cultivates subjective conceptual thought rooted in a mental process that I, for lack of a better word, will call contemplation.

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16 Paul (2015) makes this point in connection with the importance of authenticity in transformative decisions.  
19 Kierkegaard never explicitly defines these terms. I introduce what I think is a plausible elaboration of what Kierkegaard had in mind.
Contemplation, in the sense I intend, is more than just having experience; not all experiencing counts as contemplation. It involves a distinct process that is, like conceptual thought, partly voluntary: the deployment of attention to the content of one’s experience, for example, to the colors and textures of the ocean you while swimming, or to the haunting melody of a song. Experiences being non-conceptual representations, contemplation does not involve reasoning but rather associations among memories, images, fantasies and thoughts.

Contemplation happens in small ways every time we stop to appreciate the world as we experience it, every time we are present for what is happening in a deliberate fashion, rather than breezing through in automatic pilot (or be absorbed in thought to the exclusion of experience). Other examples include the kinds of appreciation of nature or art that involve dwelling in the experience and paying attention to other people in a non-conceptual sort of way. Contemplation is separate from conceptual thought, but it provides the basis for subjective conceptual thought, and in particular, the basis for conceptual thought about value. Values, though they are often perceived in experience, are not always readily so – their discernment requires patient contemplation. It is important to note that paying attention to the contents of experience does not necessarily mean an inward focus on experience itself, a drawing back of one’s attention to the self. It often consists in paying attention to the objects of experience, through the experience, rather than through conceptual thought. Contemplation of perceptual experience, however, often brings up memories, fantasies, and images that draw attention inward.

This latter happens in formalized contexts such as meditation and certain kinds of psychotherapy as well. Part of the aim of meditation and psycho-therapy is to impart skills of contemplation that

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20 Gareth Evans (1982) introduced the term ‘conceptual vs. ‘non-conceptual’ content into contemporary philosophical discussion where the latter characterizes perceptual and certain other mental states. His idea was that these states are like thoughts in so far as they are representational. But they are unlike thoughts in that where a thought, say that the cat is hungry, has a conceptualized content composed out of the concepts cat and is hungry, a person’s visual perception of the cat is not composed out of concepts and represents the cat in some other way.

21 The two main kinds of meditation involves focused attention, usually on the breath or parts of the body, and open monitoring, which involves an evenly hovering attention over the field of conscious experience. See Lutz et al. (2008) for the distinction.

22 See, e.g. Lutz et al. (2015), and Grossenbacher et al. (2017) for an account in cognitive neuro-science of various contemplative practices.

23 Various forms of psycho-analysis encourage this kind of thinking, e.g., in “free association” (Freudian analysis), or “active imagination” (Jungian analysis).
can be exercised in one’s daily life in one’s ongoing perceptual engagement with the world.

In extreme cases, there might be temporary states of pure contemplation, or states of pure conceptual thought,\(^{24}\) but normally the two intermingles and interacts. A thinker is subjective, in the way I propose to use the term, to the degree that they engage in contemplation, and that their conceptual thought tends toward the subjective side. A thinker is objective to the degree that they refrain from contemplation and that their conceptual thought tends toward the objective side.

People differ in their style of thought. Some engage the world mostly by thinking conceptually and tend to pay little attention to their experience. On the other hand, a highly contemplative person, for example, a monk, is attuned to their experience and their conceptual thought is mostly subjective. Most people are somewhere in between those two extremes. In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, two of the brothers, Ivan and Alyosha share the Karamazov “sensuality”, a certain intensity of experience; but Ivan reacts by repressing his feelings and withdrawing into the stance of a cynical, witty observer, while Alyosha cultivates the richness of his inner life through religious training, and views the abstractions of politicians and “learned people” as “wicked nonsense.”

Thought is understood primarily as conceptual. I want to stress that there is another mode of thought – experiential and non-conceptual – that plays an important role in our mental life. While its best-known practices – meditation and psycho-therapy – are generally understood as tools for stress management or relief from psychological pain for those in need, I suggest that contemplation has a broader role to play.

### 3. Subjective thinking and value orientation

In Sinan Antoon’s\(^{25}\) novel on the Iraq war, *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist describes his job in this way:

> If death is a postman, then I receive his letters every day. I am the one who opens carefully the bloodied and torn envelopes. I am the one who washes them, who removes the stamps

\(^{24}\) A scenario like that is described in Dennett (1978) involving complete sensory deprivation.

\(^{25}\) Antoon (2014).
of death and dries and perfumes them mumbling what I don’t entirely believe in. Then I wrap them carefully in white so they may reach their final reader – the grave.

The corpse washer, as a function of his occupation, has a more direct, subjective perspective on war’s destruction than those who learn about it from the news. He sees and contemplates, over and over, the bodies, maimed, drained of life; he touches them, his seeing and sensing intertwined with his terror. His contemplation reveals not just the gun-shot wounds, corpses, and destruction and also their particular awfulness. Such perception of dreadfulness forms the basis of further associations – it brings up related memories of friends and family killed, maimed and exiled. Attention to all this throws the dreadfulness of war and violence into sharp relief, so it can be reflected upon, and thought about.

His experiences lead him to subjective conceptions of war and its significance that separates him from a detached observer. This difference in understanding is manifest, for example, in debates between survivors of mass shootings and politicians in charge of gun laws. The corpse washer or the survivor thinks about war and violence subjectively, while most politicians, despite the occasional dramatic footage, think about it objectively, in terms of the sanitized expressions “civilian casualty” or “collateral damage”. Both ways of thinking have their virtues and vices. Politicians are expected to weigh competing considerations in an impartial manner, which requires a certain level of abstraction. Survivors, however, understand the values and moral stakes involved more thoroughly and vividly than people who never experienced war.

Sensibility can be trained in many ways – art, music, wine tasting, mountain climbing, even corpse-washing are examples – and it often involves conceptual elaboration. The experience of an arpeggio is different for one who has the concept and for one who doesn’t. What is attended by the expert are features of the world in experience, now presented in a richer way. Clearly perceived values pull us toward them as if on their own. On the other hand, when value judgments are made in isolation from relevant experience, they have limited power to change behavior, as the fate of many a New Year’s resolution shows.

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26 I want to remind the reader that by “objective” thought I don’t mean unbiased or rational thought – I simply mean a kind of thought that tends toward abstraction.

27 Of course, one might see the value in something and still be left relatively unmoved; other apprehensions of value might fill one with exuberance. Falling in love is not just seeing the beloved manifesting a multitude of excellences, it consists of being utterly taken by them. Knowing myself is, in part, knowing what truly matters to me.
Subjective thought, and particularly, contemplation, has an essential part to play in heeding the dictum “know thyself”. Coming to know myself doesn’t just mean finding out about my capacities and dispositions, habits of thought, etc., though that is certainly part of it. It also means contemplating my experiences: my perceptions of the world, sensations of my body, my emotions, memories, and fantasies as well. When I contemplate the world and the goods that seem manifested in it through the senses, I am finding out what I really want. For example, I might not realize until I start paying more attention that I like to be with a person very much even though I had never thought of them as close friends. Figuring this out requires conceptual thought; but it would not be possible without close attention to my experience of this person as well as attention to other related experiences. Contemplation is thus conducive to finding meaningful pursuits and relationships – an essential part of a good life.

One might object that value concepts differ in their subjectivity; some are more abstract than others. ‘Beauty’ or ‘love’ is subjective28; ‘vulgarity’ is more objective; ‘injustice’ is more objective still. One can perhaps ignore sensuous values and still have a rich evaluative life. But any capacity to see the world through an evaluative lens – as I suggested earlier regarding the case of Insensate Mary – is grounded in experience. One whose evaluative life centers around abstract concepts – while having dimmed or deadened any perception of value – would have cut the vital source of their connection to value. Their life becomes cerebral and dull; their self-knowledge lacking. Thinking about matters of value in abstract terms conceals the significance of the values involved, as in the case of, e.g., talk about “collateral damage”. Conceptual thought – even in its subjective variety – cannot entirely replace contemplation in a pursuit of meaning.29

28 Love has both subjective and more complex, more objective conceptions; I will skip over that here.
29 Indeed, contemplation may be a last resort for moral agency when normal moral thought had lost its purchase, as in situations of extreme dehumanization. In the film Son of Saul (László Nemes, 2015) the protagonist Saul, a prisoner in Auschwitz, is first shown in a deadened state of being. In the opening scenes he hardly pays attention to any of the carnage happening around him – he is just doing his tasks in a mechanical way. He regains a sense of agency amidst the general chaos after witnessing, with his attention focused on it like a laser beam, the murder of one particular person, who he later declares to be his son (the movie is ambiguous about whether that is so). He now has a mission: to try to arrange a proper funeral.
I will leave open the question whether there are any values (e.g., sensuous ones, such as beauty or ugliness, attractiveness or repulsiveness, etc.) whose exemplification is wholly dependent on the experiences of the subject – which might permit that a flower be beautiful for me but ugly for you. In this case, there could be no gap between what I experience as beautiful and what is really beautiful. I still would need to be attentive so as not to make a mistake if I aspire to orient towards the sensuous goods, but there would be no possibility of correction based on further evidence.

On the other hand, experience does misrepresent value sometimes. This means that the contemplation of experience is just the first step in a process of discovery, a “straining” to come to an accurate grasp of the values involved. A plain example is the way emotions and memories can distort experience; jealousy, for example, can prevent one from seeing the virtues of another person accurately. Becoming familiar with the inner landscape that shades my perception of this person in unflattering ways, paves the way to form better and more just conceptions of their behavior – of seeing them as they are.30

Contemplation, however, is difficult. It requires a certain amount of self-denial: it requires the acceptance of one’s experience of the world as it is, with all the pain as well as joy it contains, instead of seeing it in the light most pleasant and flattering for the self. This runs against strong forces in human nature. As Freud has described, the mind has powerful built-in mechanisms that turn us away from unwanted experience: repression, dissociation, sublimation, etc. As he explains, there is much to value-ception that needs unpacking. Most commonly, we turn our back on subjectivity to escape from pain. Suffering, one’s own, or others’, might become bearable, one hopes, when one takes a step back and views it conceptually, abstractly. It is safer to consider the “facts” than dwell on the experience. Even small discomfort can prompt one to turn away from experience. If I pass a homeless person on the street, I might want to tune out so as not to feel any pangs of guilt about not having contributed. What needs to be learned, as Iris Murdoch has observed,31 is “how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.” Contemplation requires the skill to direct attention to what’s going

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30 Murdoch (1970) p. 32 discusses a case like this involving a mother and a daughter-in-law. Throughout the book, she emphasizes the moral relevance of the inner life in coming to a more accurate perception of value. If successfully executed, "selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen."

on in an impartial way; and it is at its most difficult when it comes to understanding and empathizing with others.

There are many ways that different cultures developed to foster this kind of self-discovery. The Chinese book of divination, the I Ching, guides decisions not by providing practical solutions, but by offering an opportunity to contemplate one’s experience, in memory and imagination, in an open-ended manner. Buddhist meditation is based on the insight that contemplative engagement is not automatic. It has to be achieved in the face of the fact that conceptual thought is more likely to command our attention, and often in its less fruitful displays, like rumination, day-dreaming and the like driven by various agendas. Buddhist forms of meditation provide training in sustaining awareness of experience without turning away from any aspect of it or trying to change it to something else.

_Slow decisions_

“I began to have an idea of my life, not as the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but as the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know” (Marion Milner, _A life of one’s own_)

"moral change and moral achievement are slow…the exercise of our freedom…is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and … not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices." (Murdoch 1970, p. 33)

“The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are 'looking', making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results." (Murdoch 1970, p. 22)

Decisions can be framed more objectively, or more subjectively. One might decide between career choices by weighing them in relatively abstract terms, such as the pay involved, the security the job offers, opportunities for learning, etc. Alternatively, one might frame the decision, at least in part, in terms of imagining, or trying to approximate in one’s experience what it might be like to work in those occupations. Such a framing allows a more nuanced sense of the values involved as well as an authentic appreciation of them. Paul (2015) emphasized the importance of doing this whenever possible to maintain the authenticity of the decision.
Objective deliberation, with its straightforward considerations of value and chance of success is relatively fast. It doesn’t take weeks or months to complete. Subjective deliberation, on the other hand, takes time. 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. It happens sometimes as a result of a familiar consideration presenting itself over and over again – as, for example, in the case of having to deal with an untrustworthy friend or lover. You might have understood, in an abstract sense, what is happening, and may have been at the point of trying to draw the consequences. But your decision never stuck. However, once you have gradually allowed yourself to fully experience your friend’s behavior – putting aside any effort to find excuses – you will likely come to a point where you can act. As Kierkegaard puts it in *Either/Or*,

> Ask yourself, and continue to ask until you find the answer. 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.

The crucial part of decision making is the process of discovery that precedes it. Whereas rational choice theory provides an algorithm for comparing choices once I know their value, it is contemplation that helps determining what those values are. 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.”

Paul casts doubt on the relevance of decision theory as a useful model for transformative decisions. My approach signifies another way in which taking subjective experience seriously suggests a shortcoming of rational decision theory as a model for actual decision making. Decision theory treats knowledge of values as readily available; or at least has nothing to say about how to obtain it. In fact, finding out what one values is a long and painstaking process.

*Appreciating the world*

A more contemplative approach fosters appreciation. The point is not just that contemplation discloses values to pursue – it also leads to valuing life as such. It can bestow vividness and meaning on ordinary, boring, everyday activities; the sense that one’s life has touched this world. As D.T. Suzuki (1956) remarks:
“Life, as far as it is lived in concreto, is above concepts as well as images. To understand it we have to dive into and come in touch with it personally; to pick up or cut out a piece of it for inspection murders it; when you think you have got into the essence of it; it is no more, for it has ceased to live but lies immobile and all dried up.” (D.T Suzuki (1956, p. 58)

A contemplative approach to decisions also results in more spontaneity. There is 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 is our highest faculty, an manifestation of our autonomy; 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 kill innocence and charm; can be the ruin of the dancer and the actor. It impedes the free, spontaneous response to the allures of the world manifesting in experience.

Contemplation is necessary for the appreciation of literature, music or art. Take the example of reading a poem while attending to the experiences that accompany it, and compare that with merely thinking conceptually about the same content.

At the entrance, my bare feet on the dirt floor,
Here, gusts of heat; at my back, white clouds,
I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this:
To glorify things just because they are.32

Conceptual thought alone, however subjective, will not crack the poem open; it is necessary to contemplate the feelings, memories, and images evoked by the poem. Such contemplation captures the deep structure of experience; uncovering its resonances and dissonances, its associative structure. The poem’s imagery mixes with experiences you remember, creating the sense of awe it expresses, a sense of the value of ordinary life. Only then – and only partially – can one’s understanding be put to words and thought about conceptually.33

33 This distinction between objective and subjective thought has strong affinities with psychologist John Teasdale and Philip Bernard’s account of “propositional” and “implicational” subsystems in working memory. They call their account the “interactive subsystems” model (see Barnard and Teasdale 1991, Barnard 2007).
The affective component of experience is pervasive. Besides the familiar sensuous values, it can also represent reality as having mysterious, otherworldly or occult aspects; the world can be experienced as profound or profane, as a home or as a wilderness. Until recently almost everyone, even educated people believed in an “invisible” world; a spiritual backdrop to the visible one that enlivens it and is in mutual interaction with it. Nature, art, music or ritual brought intimations of the invisible world; people sought to get in touch with it through contemplation. This view of an enchanted universe alive with strange forces received a thorough critique in the last three hundred years, in the wake of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. It is harder today to take these affective aspects of experience – seemingly revealing an enchanted universe – seriously. This might have ramifications for how seriously one takes the affective aspects of one’s experience in general, even as far as the strictly “secular” values are concerned. I have argued that becoming more contemplative, more attentive, more subjective is an important choice. According to Kierkegaard, it is the most important of all.

References:


