LAURIE PAUL’S *TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE*
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1. Authenticity as Requiring Imagination

Authentic decision-making requires imagining how your life will be if you decide one way or another. But what about cases in which your decision may affect your life in ways that you currently find unimaginable? In these cases, on the face of it, authentic decision-making is impossible. This is, I think, the main line of argument in Laurie Paul’s brilliant *Transformative Experience*. It depends on the idea that ‘authentic’ decision-making must rely on imaginative understanding. But what conception of ‘imaginative understanding’ do we need to make this idea work?

The psychiatrist Karl Jaspers famously contrasted empathetic or imaginative understanding of patients with scientific explanation. On the one hand the psychiatrist can understand the patient’s subjectivity, and grasp ‘genetically by empathy’ how one psychic event emerges from another. This may not always be possible; for example Jaspers thought that delusions were ‘un-understandable’ in this way. In the case of such patients, all we can achieve is ‘scientific’ explanation, in which we use our knowledge, from repeated experience, that ‘a number of phenomena are regularly linked together’, and on this basis, ‘we explain causally’ (Jaspers 1913/1997).

Suppose we consider a psychiatrist confronted with a patient in a clinical setting. Suppose the psychiatrist does have a good empathetic or imaginative understanding of the patient. Jaspers doesn’t put this point this way, but it seems evident that the psychiatrist here can achieve a certain ‘authenticity’ in their responses to the patient. The therapist’s imaginative understanding of the patient can directly drive their emotional engagement with the patient. In contrast, consider a psychiatrist who has only a ‘scientific’ understanding of the patient. The therapist has, we may suppose, ticked off a certain number of critical checkboxes relating to the patient’s symptoms. Now she looks up a manual saying how to respond to a patient with those symptoms: what treatment is appropriate, what points to look out for in talking with the patient. Perhaps she also relies on knowledge of wide range of research articles, previous clinical encounters with other patients, and so on.

I said that there’s a sense in which the emotional engagement driven by imaginative understanding is more ‘authentic’. Does this notion of authenticity have anything to do with the notion of authenticity as ‘being true to oneself’? I think it does: it’s just that the connection between your imaginative understanding of the other person and your emotional engagement is made internally; it doesn’t go by way of external connections such as books telling you how one should respond to such a patient.

This can really matter in practice. Consider a therapist confronted with a patient who has a huge problem with gambling. Let’s suppose she has a lot of imaginative insight. She is appalled at what he’s doing to his family and to himself. But her disgust is not the response mandated by the books. She tries to conform her response to him to what the books recommend. But the very fact that that’s what she is doing means that
there’s a sense in which her response is not ‘authentic’. This inauthenticity, if sensed by the patient, may in turn make a working relationship impossible.

Another, simpler way to see the connection between imaginative understanding and authenticity is to reflect on how you know that someone else’s physical pain is a bad thing. It may be that you know perfectly well what pain is, and know that some other people have it, but don’t particularly see why that should concern you, even in cases where the other person is right there in front of you. You might find a guru or spiritual instructor who tells you, and occasionally reminds that, that you should be concerned about other people who’re feeling physical pain. But this is very different to the usual case, in which an imaginative understanding of someone else’s physical pain immediately drives a compassionate response to them. A compassionate response in the ordinary case has an authenticity that the externally driven response does not.

2. What Concept of Imagination?

What concept of imagination do we need, to recognize the connection between imagination and authenticity? On the conception I recommend, imagination is de re, or externalist, in the sense that it involves imagining how the external, mind-independent environment is, as well as the mental life that is located in that environment, and (b) affective, in that your exercise of imagination directly engages your emotions and actions, without any need for further reflection.

Although current philosophy of mind has long recognized the importance of imaginative understanding, it’s been given a remarkably restricted role: providing one with knowledge of the qualia, the purely internal characteristics of someone’s mental life. On this conception, imagination provides one only with knowledge of the internal mental life, which could be as it is however things are in the external environment, and whose exercise typically requires no immediate engagement of one’s emotion and action. That’s the conception suggested by reflection on Nagel’s bat, for example, which is what made it vivid to most contemporary philosophers that imagination yields something not available by other means, or Jackson’s Mary (Nagel 2002, Jackson 2002).

My main reservation about Transformative Experience is that although it’s a great insight to connect, as Paul does, authenticity and imagination, that insight is undermined if you work with the internalist conception of imagination, as something whose function is to yield affectless knowledge of the internal mental life. On this picture, one’s preferences with regard to the mental life are something external to the imaginative exercise itself. The function of the imaginative exercise is merely to provide the data on which one’s preferences can operate.

Suppose you see an old friend who’s been reduced to living in poverty. Your empathetic grasp of how things currently are for them, your concern and distress, can have all the authenticity you like. It seems absurd to represent your imaginative understanding here as confined in its scope to the qualia of your friend. Your imaginative understanding is central to your response: it’s not merely a detached or ‘scientific’ response to your friend, viewed only as yet another terrible statistic. You’re thinking about what it must be like to live ‘in this’. But that’s not a concern with qualia, as usually conceived.
Of course Paul’s principal concern is not with imaginative understanding of other people, it’s with imaginative understanding of your own future life. But here the very same points apply. Suppose, for example, that you’re contemplating a risky career move, which really may lead to you living in poverty. You want to know, what will that be like? This is a question that calls on your imaginative understanding, if you’re to give an authentic response. But it’s not a matter of trying to imagine what your qualia will be. It’s a matter of trying to imagine what it will be like for you to live in such circumstances. And only a needlessly internalist conception of the mental will compel you to think that that’s entirely a matter of speculating about what qualia will be produced in you by these external circumstances (or that, if you’re not reflecting on qualia, you can only be engaging in an ‘external’, non-imaginative exercise).

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that one of the big ways in which philosophy of mind has found a place for imaginative understanding is in providing knowledge of perceptual experience. That means that it’s natural for Paul to try to get her point across by considering cases in which, for example, someone born color-blind is given the opportunity to see color, or someone born deaf is given the opportunity to hear. In these cases someone is being asked to make decisions regarding an outcome they can’t understand imaginatively. So, given the internalism about perceptual experience of much contemporary philosophy, it’s natural to suppose the role of imagination is to advise you as to the nature of your future qualia. Lacking that imaginative understanding, how can you make an authentic response?

Yet even in this case, I think we can see that the focus on an internalist, affectless conception of imaginative understanding doesn’t get the picture correct. If you’re being given the opportunity to hear, or to see the colors, this isn’t properly conceived as a matter of getting a new set of inner qualia. Of course, the whole poignancy here is the impossibility of the imaginative exercise; but let’s reflect for a moment on what it is you would like to do. What’s important is that you’re being asked to imagine, of the colors, what it will be like to see them. That’s a de re imaginative exercise that you’re being asked to perform. Unless you factor in that the possibility being offered to you is one in which you gain knowledge of some aspects of your environment, you’ve missed a principal factor that you ought to be taking into account in your assessment. And if you manage the imaginative exercise, but find yourself with no affective response one way or another to seeing the colors, that is in itself an important point about the possibility of ‘authentic’ decision-making. What would make authentic decision-making easy is being able to imagine what it would be like to see the colors; and once you have that, finding the prospect immediately irresistible, as part of the imaginative exercise. The immediate engagement of emotion by imagination is, as I’ve been emphasizing, a central component in authentic decision-making.

3. The Role of ‘Knowing What It’s Like’ in Transformative Experience

The role that Paul envisages for imaginative understanding is to provide you with knowledge of what your future experiences will be like. When making an ‘authentic’ decision, you choose based on what the character of your future experiences will be.
Only imaginative understanding can provide you with that knowledge of what your future experiences be like.

When you consider what might happen in your future, your consideration involves an imaginative reflection on what it will be like, from your point of view, to experience the series of future events that are the most likely outcomes of whatever it is that you choose to do. You use this reflection on what you think these events will be like, that is, what you think your lived experience will be like, to authentically determine your preferences about your future, and thus to decide how to rationally act in the present. This …. fits our philosophical account of the responsible, rational agent. So there is a clear philosophical underpinning for the powerful sense of control and authenticity we get …. (106-107)

There seem to be cases of ‘authentic’ decision-making that aren’t at all of the type Paul describes. Suppose you have a friend who has decided to accept a post as a high-school teacher in a bad part of town. You ask her, ‘But have you thought about what your subjective experiences will be like when you are doing this work?’ And she explodes, ‘My subjective experiences have nothing to do with it! Have you seen the state of these kids?’ The notion of ‘authenticity’, having something to do with the expression of one’s deepest values, or true identity, is of course notoriously difficult to make fully explicit. But I can’t see that there need be any failure of authenticity on the part of your friend in this case. The reasoning is still based on an imaginative exercise: how she could make life for those kids.

To put the point crudely, suppose you are choosing between A and B. And suppose someone comes along with a machine that, if set to A*, can generate experiences in you that you couldn’t discriminate from experiences of A. The imaginative exercise required to find ‘what A would be like’, would presumably, on Paul’s conception of it, be exactly the same as the imaginative exercise required to find ‘what A* would be like’. So the imaginative exercise couldn’t discriminate A from A*. So on this conception of it, ‘authentic’ decision-making couldn’t justify choosing A over A*.

I think it’s only very rarely that we reason in this way, and never in the context of anything that you might call a ‘big life choice’. Consider an example Paul discusses a number of times, someone deciding whether to have a child. She writes:

Of course, having a child or not having a child will have value with respect to plenty of other things, such as the local demographic and the environment. However, the primary focus here is on an agent who is trying to decide, largely independently of these external or impersonal factors, whether she wants to have a child of her own. In this case, the subjective values of the experiences stemming from the choice about having a child play the central role in the decision to procreate.

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I am struck by the contrast between this way of framing the decision and the perspective of a friend of mine who said:
‘I want to have children because my life has always been entirely centered on me, and I want to be forced to live in a different way.’

It doesn’t seem to me that this can be represented as someone bowing to ‘external or impersonal’ factors, and failing to make an ‘authentic’ decision. But neither was my friend making a decision based on the expected qualitative characters of her future experiences. Rather, she was making a decision based on reflection about her own identity: what kind of person she was and what kind of person she wanted to be.

Consider someone wondering whether to have a second child. If ‘authentic’ imagination-based reasoning really centered on reflection about your own future experiences, then the impact of the second child on your first child would simply not be a factor; or rather, it would enter into your decision-making only because the first child might make a difference to your own future subjective experiences. But consider someone who says, ‘Although things will be harder for me, I think it’s important for Benjy to have a sibling’. In effect, you give a far higher weighting to Benjy’s future subjective experiences than you do to your own. The turning point in your reflection might be a thought about how things will be for Benjy after you are dead; here reflection on your own future subjective life is not what is going on at all.

In a striking passage, Paul tries to bring out the importance of an imaginative understanding of your own future subjective life for authentic decision-making. She says:

‘Imagine Sally, who has always believed that having a child would bring her happiness and fulfillment, deciding not to have a child simply because the empirical evidence tells her she will maximize her expected value by remaining childless. For her to choose in this way, ignoring her subjective preferences and relying solely on external reasons, seems bizarre.’

A slight modulation gives us the case of Billy:

Imagine Billy, who has always believed that taking dangerous drugs would bring him happiness and fulfillment, deciding not to take them simply because the empirical evidence tells him that’s how he will maximize his expected value. For him to choose this way, ignoring his subjective preferences and relying solely on external reasons, seems bizarre.

The general point here is that while it seems an extremely interesting idea to connect authentic decision-making with imaginative understanding, there is a certain ‘internalism’ about Paul’s understanding of imaginative understanding that is skewing the picture. We should indeed, as Paul says, connect authenticity to imaginative understanding; that seems to me the great insight of the book. The trouble is the implicit restriction of imaginative understanding to ‘knowing what it is like’ to have various experiences, where this is understood in ‘internalist’ terms, so that facts about the environment are thought of as ‘external’ or ‘impersonal’ factors, that can only undermine the ‘authenticity’ of one’s decision-making. After all, slight modulations of Sally’s case too
might leave us feeling that she ought to be allowing her dreams to collapse, given the dangers she faces. We could agree that authentic decision-making has to be grounded in imaginative understanding, while insisting that imaginative understanding must always encompass facts about the environment. Suppose, for example, that Sally is working obsessively towards her dream of being a great landscape gardener. She has a vision of her beautiful gardens enriching every state in the country. She has an imagination-driven approach to decision-making on all the big things in her life. But that’s not because what she cares about are her future subjective experiences. What she cares about are the gardens.
REFERENCES


