



# What must be lost: on retrospection, authenticity, and some neglected costs of transformation

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Received: 13 January 2023 / Accepted: 28 April 2023  
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## Abstract

A sensibility is, on a rough first pass, an emotional orientation to the world. It shapes how things appear to us, evaluatively speaking. By transfiguring things' evaluative appearances, a change in sensibility can profoundly alter one's overall experience of the world. I argue that some forms of sensibility change entail (1) risking one's knowledge of what experiences imbued with one's prior sensibility were like, and (2) surrendering one's grasp on the intelligibility of one's prior emotional apprehensions. These costs have consequences for Laurie Paul's 'problem of transformative experience.' Paul has argued that when we are poised to become someone new, our inexperience generates problems for authentic choice about our own futures. By reckoning with the epistemic losses involved in sensibility change, I show that this problem must not be confined to novel transformations. Prior experience does not guarantee the knowledge or understanding necessary for choosing authentically (in Paul's sense). If the problem Paul highlights is indeed a problem *at all*, then, it is a still more pervasive and intractable one than it has been taken to be.

**Keywords** Transformation · Experience · Sensibility · Emotion · Alienation · Memory · Empathy · Authenticity

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child;  
but when I became a man, I put away childish things. — 1 Corinthians 13:11,  
King James Version.

## 1 Introduction

One of the more startling parts of growing up is realizing that some familiar thing has taken on an entirely new evaluative cast. We register with a pang that all the charm seems to have drained from a formerly beloved book. The words are just the same, and yet somehow they have gone sour. Or we find ourselves drawn to an activity that

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used to look hopelessly, unbearably dull. Once I would have positively recoiled at the prospect of afternoon's birdwatching—and yet here I am, eagerly lacing my boots and hunting about for my binoculars. These sorts of discoveries alert us to changes in our own sensibilities. A sensibility is, on a rough first pass, an emotional orientation to the world. It shapes how things appear to us, evaluatively speaking. By transfiguring things' evaluative appearances, a change in sensibility can profoundly alter one's overall experience of the world.

The 'problem of transformative choice,' as introduced by Laurie Paul, is not a problem about sensibility change per se. Rather, it is a puzzle (or a set of puzzles) about how to deliberate well about 'transformative experiences.' A transformative experience is both epistemically and personally transformative: by living through the experience, we will acquire previously unavailable knowledge of what some experience is like, and we will also undergo a change in our 'point of view,' where that latter change either consists in, involves or entails a change to our 'core preferences' (Paul, 2014, p. 16). Paul argues that opportunities to choose transformative experiences present us with a special difficulties. The deepest-looking of these difficulties, and the one I will confine myself to here, stems from our sense that we ought to choose our futures authentically. The gap between our present knowledge and preferences, on the one hand, and our possible future knowledge and preferences, on the other, supposedly threatens to make it impossible to live up to this deliberative standard.<sup>1</sup> Let us call this problem the *authenticity problem*.

Changes in sensibility do not always have experiential causes.<sup>2</sup> And, depending upon how we think about preferences, we might find also find cases in which a person's core preferences change without a corresponding change in sensibility. Our emotional evaluative apprehensions are not bound to coincide with our value judgements, so I could alter my judgment about an action's choice-worthiness (and thus count as having changed my preferences, in one sense) without any change to my emotional apprehension of the action. For these reasons, the question of whether to undergo a transformative experience is not just the same as the question of whether to undergo a sensibility change. Still, the life changes most frequently invoked in recent discussions of transformative choice do centrally involve sensibility change. When one becomes a parent, it is said, one's emotional register of things' relative value and significance is dramatically rewritten. Things that once felt all-important now feel trivial, and vice-versa. Presumably, the same would be true of the much-discussed case of becoming a vampire. If a vampire's heart could surge at anything, it would be at the thought of fresh blood and a cold crypt—prospects that her pre-vampiric self would surely have shudderingly registered as repulsive. If we want to fully understand what is at stake

<sup>1</sup> In Paul (2014) and elsewhere, Paul contends that transformative experiences also present a special problem for rational choice. However, Paul's later exchange with Richard Pettigrew (Pettigrew, 2015; Paul, 2015a; see also Pettigrew, 2020) suggests that Paul is ultimately concerned less with the possibility of rational choice per se in transformative contexts, and more with the possibility of rational *authentic* choice in transformative contexts. Demands of authenticity seem to me to form the true core of the problem of transformative choice, and this core can be characterized without invoking imperatives of rationality, so I will bracket questions about rational choice.

<sup>2</sup> One grim example: A brain tumor is not itself an experience, but brain tumors have been known to cause dramatic alterations in sufferers' patterns of emotional construal (see e.g. Madhusoodanan et al., 2015).

when we contemplate transformative choices, then, we should ask: What do we stand to gain when our sensibility changes? And what do we stand to lose?

Recent discussions of transformative choice have focused on the nature and deliberative significance of the epistemic goods only experience can afford. Here, I will instead study the epistemic losses associated with sensibility change. All sensibility changes entail some epistemic risks and costs. In reckoning with these risks and costs, we will find the grounds to challenge some assumptions embedded in the ongoing conversation about transformative choice. As an added benefit, this investigation will also shed light on our own attitudes about unbidden sensibility change.

I begin by reviewing the authenticity problem (Sect. 2) and elaborating on my initial characterization of sensibilities (Sect. 3). In Sects. 4 and 5, I argue that some forms of sensibility change entail (1) risking one's knowledge of what experiences imbued with one's prior sensibility were like, and (2) surrendering one's grasp on the intelligibility of one's prior emotional apprehensions. The former cost makes trouble for the assumption that the authenticity problem could only arise for choices about novel life experiences. The latter cost makes trouble for the related but distinct assumption that the authenticity problem could only arise if, for a given prospective experience, an agent does not know what an experience of that type is like. The general moral of Sects. 4 and 5 is that if the authenticity problem is indeed a problem *at all*, it is a still more pervasive and intractable one than it has been taken to be. It should arise whenever we are poised to become someone different, not just when we are poised to become someone we have never been before.

## 2 The authenticity problem

According to Paul, our normal procedures for choosing our futures authentically will not work in transformative choice contexts because an 'epistemic wall' stands between us and one or more of our optional futures (2020a, *passim*). To understand the authenticity problem, we need to know: what is the nature of this epistemic wall, and why does it appear?

In a transformative choice context, an agent must choose between a set of possible experiences, one or more of which will be epistemically and personally transformative. An epistemically transformative experience is one that teaches us something we could not have learned without undergoing that experience or one relevantly similar to it, namely, *what it's like* to have that experience of that kind.<sup>3</sup> Before tasting a durian fruit, Paul claims, one cannot know what tasting one would be like. The same goes for seeing the color red. Some epistemically transformative experiences are also personally transformative. A personally transformative experience is one that involves a re-ordering of one's 'core preferences' (Paul, 2014, p. 116). Paradigmatic personally transformative experiences include serious traumas, great triumphs, and religious conversions. Personally transformative experiences may be epistemically transformative in a special way: through having them, one may learn what is like to have those

<sup>3</sup> See Kind (2020) for a critical discussion of Paul's approach to classifying experience kinds.

re-ordered core preferences. In Paul's parlance, one may learn what it is like to be a different self.

I say one 'may learn' because Paul indicates that personally transformative experiences are not always epistemically transformative. The exceptions she points to are cases where "you've undergone a similar transformation in the past," such that the transformation is not a "radically new experience for you" (2014, p. 17). Our primary epistemic poverty in the face of transformative choice is presented as a function of our future possible experiences' novelty. Transformative experiences are epistemically transformative insofar as and because "they are experiences that are new to you...experiences of a sort that you've never had before" (Paul, 2020a, p. 17).

On Paul's view, experience comes with some remarkable exclusive benefits. My living through an experience guarantees me knowledge of what that particular experience was like.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, it also guarantees me a new power of imaginative modeling. I may now engage the first-personal simulation of relevantly similar future experiences, and thus come to know "quite a bit about" what my future experiences of this same type will be like (Paul, 2014, p. 14). It follows that we can know what a future experience is like if and only if we've had an experience of that kind before. So, our first bite of durian is epistemically transformative, but not our second. This 'second bite' rule extends to personally transformative experiences, too. A human on the brink of first becoming a vampire does not know what her experience will be like. But were she to return to human life after a spell amongst the undead, a second vampire bite and its attendant physical-cum-spiritual transmogrification would not be epistemically transformative for her.<sup>5</sup> She would have already had the ability to first-personally imagine or otherwise first-personally represent the eerie experiences in store, and thus she would have already been well-equipped to know what those experiences would be like.

There is still more to the 'wall' that confronts us in transformative choice contexts because the primary form of epistemic impoverishment begets other deficiencies. Crucially, if I don't know what it's like to be a vampire, I will be poorly epistemically positioned vis-à-vis the subjective value of vampiric experience. The subjective value of an experience is its "experientially grounded value" for a given person (Paul, 2015b, p. 477). As I understand Paul's notion of subjective value, an experience's subjective value is conditioned by one's cares.<sup>6</sup> It will typically include the experience's hedonic value, but it is by no means limited to the pleasurable nature of the experience.<sup>7</sup> So long as a value "attach[es] to the contentful features" of an experience," it counts as subjective value (Paul, 2015b, p. 478). If I am a rather strange sort who positively *lives* for intensely confusing experiences, for instance, then the subjective value of a

<sup>4</sup> This is at least true of Paul's view as articulated in Paul (2014), and as reiterated in Paul (2020a), but see Paul (2020b) for a departure from this view.

<sup>5</sup> We do need a caveat, here. If a second stretch of vampiredom were for some reason a different *kind* of experience than a first stretch would be, then it would still be epistemically transformative. Paul herself clearly allows that at least some personal transformations can be repeated, though, such that the later transformation does not entail undergoing a new kind of experience. And she even seems to suggest that the transition to vampiredom in particular would be repeatable in this sense (Paul, 2014, p. 116).

<sup>6</sup> Paul claims that subject value "depends upon what we care about" (2014, p. 15).

<sup>7</sup> For discussion on this point see Kaupinnen (2015) and Paul (2015b).

prospective experience for me will mostly be a matter of the befuddlement it promises to generate.

Paul writes: “The subjective value of an experience is assessed by knowing what it’s like to have that experience. Once you’ve had an experience of the right sort, you have the knowledge you need to be able to make inferences about what similar future experiences will be like, and thus you have the knowledge you need to assign future subjective values of that type” (2014, p. 14). On one natural reading of that first sentence, the knowing simply *is* the assessing; there is nothing to learning the subjective value of an experience above and beyond knowing what it is like. There is admittedly room for doubt about that interpretation.<sup>8</sup> What seems clearer, taking that excerpt as a whole, is that Paul thinks knowledge of what a future experience will be like constitutes the sole epistemic resource needed for assessing that experience’s subjective value, or at least guarantees that we have all the necessary epistemic resources to do so. We are epistemically well-placed to assess an experience’s subjective value if and only if we know what that experience is like. Threading that biconditional together with the one previously discussed, we arrive at the conclusion that we have the epistemic resources needed to assess (or assign, or grasp, or know) a prospective experience’s subjective value if and only if we have previously had an experience of that kind.<sup>9</sup>

It remains to say how that conclusion is supposed to generate a special problem for authentic deliberation in transformative choice contexts. Often, when we think about authentic choice, we have in mind decisions that reflect our own grip on our deepest, highest, or otherwise *realist* cares (that is, our values, concerns, passions, or preferences). Paul’s notion of authentic choice seconds the commonplace idea that being guided by our understanding of our own present cares is necessary for authentic deliberation about life choices, but it also introduces a further requirement. In order to choose authentically, one also needs epistemic access to the objects of choice, and more particularly to their subjective values: “Having a first-personal grasp on the subjective values of your possible futures allows you to make choices about your future authentically” (Paul, 2015b, p. 483). In non-transformative choice contexts, it is not inevitable that we will choose authentically. We may pay no heed to our own cares in choosing. Still, our prior experience at least ensures that we have the grasp of subjective value that is necessary to choose authentically. When one of more of our optional future experiences is transformative, by contrast, the subjective values of our possible futures are beyond our ken, and we are consequently faced with an authenticity-undermining epistemic handicap.

Of course, this is only a problem for us as deliberators if authenticity in Paul’s sense is something we care about, or at least something we can be made to care about. Why shouldn’t we dismiss Paul’s new epistemic requirement as arbitrary and unwarranted?

<sup>8</sup> It is commonly thought (following Davidson (1971)) that *whenever* an agent  $\phi$ s by  $\psi$ ing, her  $\phi$ ing and her  $\psi$ ing are just the same act, but Paul may not share that view.

<sup>9</sup> Paul characterizes our epistemic impoverishment relative to the subjective value of transformative experiences in a few ways. She variously claims that subjective value is “discovered,” “made cognitively accessible,” “grasped,” “known,” or “assessed” by knowing what it’s like to have that experience. (Paul, 2014, pp. 1–214). Since Paul herself does not make much of the possible differences between knowing, grasping, assessing, or accessing when it comes to subjective values, we can treat them as interchangeable in this context. What matters for my purposes is the relationship she posits between knowing what it’s like, on the one hand, and knowing/grasping/discovering/assessing the relevant subjective value, on the other.

As I understand it, Paul's position is that if we reflect carefully, we will realize that we do ideally want our choices about our futures to *make perfect sense* to us.<sup>10</sup> When does a choice make perfect sense to us? Only when we fully, first-personally grasp all the values and cares that we think of as mattering to the worthiness of that choice, as well as their fit with each other. A choice might neatly align with our present cares, but it will not make perfect sense to us (and thus will not be admirably authentic) if we are ourselves estranged from those cares and have only a third-personal awareness of them. Likewise, a choice will not make perfect sense to us if we cannot grasp its subjective value, and thus cannot see for ourselves how it will align with or answer to our deepest experientially-oriented cares. It does seem like we can have some information about the subjective value of a novel experience in advance of living through it. We might have it on excellent authority from some seer (or just some friend who knows us very well) that a given possible experience would beautifully realize our deepest experientially-oriented aspirations. But were we to simply allow that authoritative testimony to guide our choosing, we would not really be true to ourselves. It would be more authentic to strive for a decision informed by a comprehensive personal understanding of the fit between the experience and our cares.

One way of pushing back on Paul's authenticity problem is to argue that it unduly fetishizes first-personal understanding. Perhaps there are attractive and valuable ways of being true to ourselves that do not involve, as it were, looking before we leap.<sup>11</sup> Another strategy leaves Paul's deliberative ideals unchallenged, but denies that inexperience generates quite the impenetrable epistemic wall that Paul envisions.<sup>12</sup> I am interested not in undoing or mitigating the problem, but rather in showing that if the problem is genuine, it must have a rather different form and scope than even Paul herself has acknowledged. If we take Paul's characterization of the ideal of authenticity seriously, then the problem should not actually hinge upon a lack of experience or even of what-it's-like knowledge. To see why not, let us now turn to the phenomenon of sensibility change.

### 3 The nature of sensibilities and sensibility change

In "On the Standard of Taste," Hume notes that there is a particular 'diversity in the internal frame' responsible for blameless and ineliminable divergence in aesthetic taste: "One person is more pleased with the sublime; another with the tender; a third with raillery. One has a strong sensibility to blemishes, and is extremely studious of correctness: Another has a more lively feeling of beauties, and pardons twenty absurdities and defects for one elevated or pathetic stroke" (Hume, 1985 [1777], p. 244–245). Hume is pointing here to intrapersonal variation in sensibility. A sensibility is a world

<sup>10</sup> 'Making perfect sense' is admittedly not Paul's own terminology, but Paul does repeatedly stress the importance of comprehensive first-personal understanding for authentic choice. See e.g. Paul (2015a, pp. 810–811), Paul (2015b, p. 483), and Paul (2020a, pp. 26–30).

<sup>11</sup> For thoughts along these lines, see e.g. Dougherty et al. (2015), Khan (2021), Friedman's comments on Paul (2014) delivered at the 2015 Pacific APA (available at <https://jfriedmanphilosophy.github.io/APATET.pdf>) and Yao (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Skepticism about the epistemic wall figure in e.g. Kind (2020), Ismael (2019), and Arpaly (2020).

orientation that ultimately manifests in our patterns of emotional evaluative apprehension.<sup>13</sup> Emotional evaluative apprehension is a species of seeing as. Part of what it is to be consciously angered or amused or horrified by something is to experience that thing as having a relevant evaluative property, one that invites or demands our ongoing emotional response.<sup>14</sup> When some behavior horrifies us, for example, we see it as horrible, which is to say that we see it as meriting the appalled reaction we are currently experiencing. Thanks to the diversity of human sensibilities, the same object or event might have a radically different emotional evaluative appearance for one person than it does for another.

We can speak of sensibilities in a global sense, as encompassing all of an individual's emotional evaluative dispositions, or in a narrower sense that allows us to distinguish between, for example, an individual's aesthetic, moral, and prudential sensibilities.<sup>15</sup> As Hume's observation suggests, one's sensibility is partly a matter of which non-evaluative features of situations or objects one is disposed to notice, and how much attention one is disposed to devote to those features. It is also a matter of how one is disposed to emotionally evaluatively apprehend the features one does notice. Hume's more pedantic critic will find his attention powerfully drawn to irregularities that other art appreciators might not even take note of, and those irregularities will naturally show up for him as aesthetically disfiguring. He will feel perturbed by these faults and will be inclined to ruefully ruminate on them (how easy it would have been to avoid the grammatical slip! And now the prose is *ruined*!) An art appreciator who always relishes the unfettered expression of creative energy above all else might also notice some of the same 'errors,' but she would experience them differently. For her, they would instead register as a delightful manifestation of the author's independence from stifling convention.

Differences in sensibility are naturally linked with differences in evaluative judgment, but they are importantly distinct from them. One's evaluative judgments may be formed coolly and reflectively, and they may diverge substantially from one's emotional evaluative apprehensions, which have something very much like the immediacy and resilience we associate with sensory perception. The self-doubting pedantic critic might judge that really, it is not a sin against beauty to carelessly split infinitives, but that judgment will not stop him from feeling that such offenses call out for teeth-grashing disdain. When one has a conscious emotional apprehension of some object or feature as gorgeous, or disgusting, or cruel, or precious, one is by no means bound to endorse that seeming as accurate. At the same time, however, even a disavowed conscious emotional apprehension does make a kind of sense to the one experiencing it. Even the self-critical pedant will find his own irritated response to be *intelligible*, that is, apparently fitting. Part of what it is to be (consciously) irritated by something is to experience that thing as having features that call out for one's irritated response.

<sup>13</sup> This conception of sensibility is similar but not identical to that of D'Arms (2000). D'Arms defines a sensibility as "a disposition to experience particular kinds of emotional reactions in response to particular sorts of cues" (p. 1490). See also D'Arms and Jacobson (2010).

<sup>14</sup> I elaborate on this claim in *redacted*. Zagzebski (2003) and Achs (2022) also defend similar claims.

<sup>15</sup> We might also draw even finer distinctions, of course: we can and do sensibly speak of e.g. people's gastronomic or even oenophilic sensibilities.



The thing seems to be irritating, so (of course) irritation will appear to be a fitting response to it.

Evaluative properties are higher-level properties. If they obtain, they must do so in virtue of some lower-level properties. The phenomenology of emotional apprehension reflects this ontological fact. We do not just emotionally register things as outrageous or disgraceful or lovely *simpliciter*. Rather, we see things as having these evaluative properties in virtue of their other, lower-level properties, and we see those lower-level properties as ultimately licensing our emotional response. So, for instance, when I emotionally register a giant sequoia as awesome, my own awed response seems to me to be authorized by various features of the tree: the sequoia is massive, fire-scarred, ancient. A person with a different sensibility might have a sense of the awesome keyed to different lower-level properties. Maybe they are bowled over by displays of human ingenuity but feel that there is nothing special about big plants. Maybe the botanical even registers as insipid or hateful for them. Alexander Nehamas, for one, claimed to “despise trees [and] find flowers indifferent” (2000, p. 395).

A person with strictly Nehamasian sensibilities, who feels only boredom (or loathing!) when he walks through a sequoia grove, could conceivably trust that he is simply missing out on something. He could reject his own sensibility as inadequate, and on those grounds judge that his friends’ awed responses are actually more apt than his own. Still, because the grove immediately and insistently emotionally registers for him as uninteresting or worse, rather than as awesome, the intelligibility of his companions’ awed responses will escape his grasp. That is not to say that their responses will necessarily be surprising to him. He might have a robust scientific understanding of the psychology of awe, and an accordingly excellent ability to predict which sorts of stimuli will elicit awe responses in which sorts of people. Rather, the relevant limitation is that he cannot get the trees’ apparent awesomeness into view for himself, since the trees lack the features that his own sense of the awesome is sensitive to and—what is worse—have features that are positively incompatible with his sense of the awesome. His companions will likewise struggle to see or picture the trees as despicable, and thus to grasp the intelligibility of our plant-hater’s opposed emotional evaluative apprehension. To grasp for themselves the intelligibility of the others’ emotional evaluative apprehension of the grove, the opposed parties would have to alter their own sensibilities, or at least find a way of escaping them.

Experience is typically laden with emotional evaluation. We are not always racked with violent passion, but the objects or situations we encounter almost inevitably have some evaluative sheen or other that we register through feeling.<sup>16</sup> So, our sensibilities have a profound impact on our overall experience of the world, and more generally on what it is like to be us. People with different sensibilities notice differently and feel differently, and those divergences naturally contribute to further forms of cognitive and agential diversity which render others’ forms of life still more alien to us. Much hay has been made of the threat such diversity poses to interpersonal understanding.<sup>17</sup> As Hume also noted, however, diversity in sensibility is not only interpersonal. Our

<sup>16</sup> Here I second Balog’s speculation that “Perhaps all normal experience is evaluative—things don’t tend to be experienced as entirely neutral” (2020, p. 258).

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Goldie (2011a, 2011b), Mackenzie (2006), and Langkau (2021).



sensibilities evolve as we age: “A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who take pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions” (1985 [1777], pp. 244–245).

Even the most constitutionally constant of people should be able to pick out some respects in which they have moved away from their earlier sensibilities. As a child, I adored all things rococo. Anything gilded, encrusted, or otherwise bedizened struck me as exceptionally beautiful. My current sense of beauty is oriented in an entirely different way. Once, I could not get enough of Fragonard. Now, that sort of frilly romanticism just gives me a toothache. I love only symmetry and stark forms.

Of course, not all sensibility changes are equally dramatic and absolute. Our sensibilities may mature without approaching the sort of evaluative inversion involved in my aesthetic conversion to minimalism. And it may sometimes be possible to add a new sensibility, even a very different one, without thereby eliminating an older one. Some people move between multiple very different social realms, each of which have their own characteristic orienting structures of power, value, and meaning. For such ‘world-travelers’ (as Lugones (1987) memorably names them) it may be relatively natural to develop contrasting parallel sensibilities: as an inhabitant of one ‘world,’ they are easily amused by goofy japes, whereas in their other ‘world,’ their sense of humor is dryly cerebral. The encapsulated nature of the realms between which a world-traveler shuttles encourages the fragmentation or the multiplication of self. But outside of the context of world-traveling, it is perhaps more common for our sensibilities to be partially or fully overwritten, rather than multiplied. We continue to have just one sense of beauty, or humor, or fairness, but that sense is re-keyed to alternative lower-level properties as we grow. Whether a sensibility change is of the re-keying or the multiplying variety, it.

## 4 Forgetting what it’s like

Mostly, sensibility changes sneak up on us. They do not have the good grace to announce themselves in advance, much less present themselves as a possible object of choice. Nevertheless, we can make choices that will centrally involve a sensibility change, as with the aforementioned examples of becoming a vampire or a parent, and we can even imagine choices that would involve reversion to a prior sensibility. The latter sort of choice contexts will arise relatively rarely, in part because experience tends to condition our sensibilities. One might be able to redevelop a recognizably punk sensibility at age fifty, after having lived one’s adult decades as a person with mainstream middle-class sensibilities, but it will not be just the same sensibility one had as a teenager. Those intervening years of experience are bound to inform the quality of one’s new contempt for bourgeois values. Some sorts of changes in sensibility are also hard to undo for other reasons. Becoming a parent changes one’s sensibilities in part by changing one’s relationships and responsibilities, and those latter changes may be effectively irreversible. Even if the question is usually an idle one, though, people do ask themselves: if I could be my old (ska-loving/thrill-seeking/coolly cynical/rococo-fanatic) self again, would I?

For Paul, the authenticity problem arises whenever the transformation on offer is a novel one. Still, Paul's view entails that there is an important consolation available to the affected deliberator. If the deliberator chooses to change, she will acquire a new epistemic good—knowledge of what its like to be a vampire, say—without thereby losing knowledge of what it was like to live with her old sensibility. By the light of what I have called Paul's 'second bite' rule, the deliberator is at least assured, as she stands on the precipice of a major sensibility change, that in the future she will be epistemically equipped to authentically deliberate about reverting to her earlier sensibility. After all, she already knows what it is like to have an ordinary human horror of drinking blood and sleeping in caskets. The transformative change up ahead may be profoundly destabilizing, but in terms of her what-it's-like knowledge, as well as her attendant grasp on the subjective value of experiences, the change promises nothing but upside. Indeed, Paul regards this epistemic upside as a powerful reason in its own right to choose transformation. We can and do highly value the revelation that comes with transformative experience (Paul, 2014, pp. 102–123).

Paul assumes that our knowledge of what our past experiences were like is secure, or at least that is unthreatened by transformative change.<sup>18</sup> Even if we become very different people with very different sensibilities, one thing will stay the same: because we have lived through past experiences, we can access their contents through retrospection. That is, we will be able to conjure up a vivid first-personal representation of our prior experiences. The future may be unknown, but our personal past is a familiar country, and one that we can revisit at will.

Recent experimental work on the nature of memory gives us reason to doubt that there is such a stark asymmetry between our first-personal access to the content of past experiences, on the one hand, and our first-personal access to the content of future novel experiences, on the other. Episodic or recollective memory (the target of what I am calling retrospection) is often characterized as a kind of mental time-travel with a distinctive phenomenology. It involves an experience as of reliving or re-experiencing an episode from one's past.<sup>19</sup> But decades of psychological research have taught us that while it might feel as though retrospection simply involves 're-playing' a perfectly preserved experience, our ordinary representations of past experience are to a significant degree constructed, in much the same way that prospective representations of our future experience are. Indeed, compelling evidence from neuropsychology and neuropathology indicates that prospection and retrospection are largely the work of the same simulational mental mechanisms.<sup>20</sup>

While there is still substantial disagreement about exactly how first-personal representations of both past and future experience acquire their characteristic vivacity and plenitude, it is clear that projection often plays a significant role in both prospective and retrospective representation of experiences. When we project, our present preferences, concerns, commitments, knowledge, sensibilities, or other psychological

<sup>18</sup> In a response to Barbara Montero's work on pain memory, Paul has recently allowed that some what-its-like knowledge, including experiential knowledge of pain, may be ephemeral. See Montero (2020), Paul (2020b). In that exchange, though, neither Paul nor Montero consider how transformative change might itself threaten experiential knowledge.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Tulving (1993), Brewer (1996), Rubin and Umanath (2015), and Boyle (2020).

<sup>20</sup> For helpful overviews, see De Brigard (2014) and Michaelian (2016).

features are allowed to shape our simulation of an experience. So, for instance, my prospective representation of just how it will feel to betray my friend may be colored by the importance I now attach to loyalty. Projection does not necessarily render such representations less accurate than they would otherwise be. A strict quarantine of our current sensibilities would in many cases simply block the most efficient route to a good grasp of what a future experience will be like. But when peoples' current psychological profile substantially diverges from that of their future selves, forecasting errors multiply. For instance, we tend to radically underestimate how much future pain, social pressures, and other stressors will affect both our preferences and our enjoyment of some experiences.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, parallel errors crop up in retrospection. When we are not in pain, we tend to misrepresent past pain experiences, and when we are not on holiday we misrepresent how much we enjoyed past holidays (Christiansen-Szalanski, 1984; Wirtz et al., 2003). There is also some experimental evidence bearing more directly on how sensibility changes in particular compromise our representations of prior emotional experiences. Levine (1997) hypothesizes that we fill in gaps in emotional memories by combining our recollection of the emotion-eliciting circumstances with our present appraisal of those circumstances. So, for instance, in recollecting our prior feelings about a political candidate's defeat, we draw on our current appraisal of the candidate. In a series of studies, Levine and her colleagues have found that the more an individual's evaluative appraisals have shifted since the time of a target emotional experience, the less stable and accurate their recollection of the prior emotion is. This effect appears to become more pronounced as the experiences in question become more temporally distant.<sup>22</sup> While we rarely misrepresent the general valence of a past emotional response, our present appraisals do at least exert a distorting effect on our representation of those passions' intensity.

If reconstruction via sensibility projection were not a substantial part of how we represent past experiences, then allowing our present sensibility to be re-keyed would be less epistemically risky. Sensibility projection does not seem to be limited to our representations of the future, though. If I stick to the same sensibility, then I can be relatively confident that I will be able to represent my older emotionally changed experiences accurately. Even extensive projection of my present sensibility will not introduce error. By contrast, a sensibility change may endanger my present experiential knowledge. Now, I know exactly how it feels to revel in the comfort of an early night in. If I become a party person, will I still be able to represent this delicious satisfaction accurately and first-personally? Or will my future distaste for the homebody lifestyle infect my future recollections, and prevent me from truly representing what it was like? If we embrace Paul's framing of the authenticity problem, these questions have real stakes for us as deliberators. Losing my grip on what it is like to be a homebody means losing my ability to grasp the subjective value of that way of being. And if I cannot grasp the subjective value of an experience or a way of being, then I cannot choose it

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Christiansen-Szalanski (1984), Van Boven et al. (2012), and Wirtz et al. (2003), as well as Maibom (2016) for a philosophical overview.

<sup>22</sup> See Levine (1997), Levine et al., (2001, 2009), and Wilson et al. (2003). Goldie (2011b) also speculates that one's present character bleeds into one's episodic recollection of prior experiences. See Helton and Register (forthcoming) for additional discussion of projection's relevance to authentic choice.

authentically. Since sensibility changes do sometimes cause us to misrepresent what a past experience was like, the authenticity problem must not be actually confined to choices about novel experiences.

It is important not to overstate this particular epistemic threat. It would be too much to insist that once our sensibilities change, we must lose all knowledge of what experiences imbued with our prior sensibility were like. Indeed, the familiar phenomenon of nostalgia seems to presuppose some enduring sense of what those earlier experiences were like. Nostalgia is a form of yearning not just for days gone by, but for the sweet simplicity of one's earlier orientation toward the world.<sup>23</sup> Merely knowing that one used to feel differently is not typically sufficient to trigger nostalgia. One feels nostalgic when one longingly or fondly remembers something of the (typically pleasurable) feelings some event or object used to inspire, whilst also acknowledging the distance between one's older evaluative apprehension and one's present one. Wistfulness for one's teenage enjoyment of cheesy pop anthems would make less sense if one had entirely forgotten the heart-pounding rush those tunes used to induce. Even if sensibility change warps our retrospective representation of past experiences, then, it seems unreasonable to deny that we regularly retain at least partial what-it's-like knowledge of those experiences.

This concession brings us to another question: is the knowledge we *could* retain in spite of a sensibility change actually enough for authentic decision-making? For Paul, what-it's-like-knowledge of some experience either constitutes or guarantees all the knowledge or understanding of subjective value we need in order to be able to authentically choose that experience.<sup>24</sup> So, assuming that the retained knowledge does count as what-it's-like knowledge, it looks like we should expect her to answer that question affirmatively. I will now make the case for answering otherwise. Even if one retains what-it's-like-knowledge, a re-keying sensibility change undoes one's grasp of one's prior emotional apprehensions' intelligibility. If we take the underlying justification for the authenticity ideal seriously, then we should count this loss of understanding as a threat to authentic choice, too.

## 5 Lost intelligibility

In Sect. 3, I explained that people with dramatically different senses of awe will struggle to grasp the intelligibility of each other's awe responses. If a person's sense of awe is strictly keyed to human ingenuity, then he will not be able to see or picture sequoias as meriting the awed responses that they elicit in others. The same sort of barrier arises in intrapersonal cases where there is a similarly substantial divergence between one's past and one's present sensibility. When we attempt to first-personally represent past experiences imbued with a prior sensibility, we might manage to steer clear of the distortions that projection tends to introduce. Take, for instance, my past experiences of admiring Rococo art. I may be epistemically lucky enough to retain a good grip on the intensity of my admiring, even though the work does not now strike

<sup>23</sup> Sweeney (2020) defends a similar view of nostalgia's intentional object.

<sup>24</sup> At least, this is her position in Paul (2014) (see Sect. 2 above).

me as admirable. As someone whose aesthetic sensibility has been entirely re-keyed, I nevertheless find that there is something about my prior emotional response to the style that now bemuses me. Looking at Fragonard's *The Swing*, I wonder: how could I have ever felt *that* frivolous nonsense was the height of beauty and refinement? *The Swing* has not changed. It is still composed of the same brushstrokes, in the same arrangement. I can see those features now, I know they had a beautiful appearance, and I have some memory of what it was like to find them beautiful. Still, I cannot now recall, recreate, or otherwise revisit that beautiful appearance. To put it another way, I cannot now see or picture *The Swing* as beautiful, and so I cannot find my old admiration for it intelligible.<sup>25</sup>

How does a re-keying sensibility change bar us from grasping the intelligibility of an earlier emotional apprehension? Partly, the problem is one of obviation. Grasping the intelligibility of my earlier admiration for the Rococo work will involve picturing the work as wonderful in virtue of its frilliness. In order to picture an art object as wonderful in virtue of its frilliness, I will obviously have to attend to its frilliness, but if I have a sufficiently well-entrenched minimalist aesthetic sensibility, then whenever I attend to frilliness, that property will immediately and insistently strike me as something that makes the art object awful. I cannot apprehend this very same feature as simultaneously aesthetically awful and aesthetically wonderful, so the immediate and insistent apprehension of awfulness leaves no room for an alternative apprehension.<sup>26</sup> Suppose I could somehow prevent myself from experiencing the frilliness as awful, though. That would not yet ensure that I could apprehend it as wonderful instead. If my old sensibility has truly been re-keyed, then I will no longer have suitably maximalist, romantic aesthetic sense to fall back on in the service of picturing things in the old way. And even if I retain that older sense in some respect, it may still be hard to draw upon if it has been long dormant.

The kind of bafflement I have described is not at all exotic. Wonder at our old taste in jeans, in music, or in partners is a staple of aging, familiar fodder for both jokes and lamentations. We have not forgotten how those fashions or those people used to make us feel, but we evidently find ourselves unable to picture them as likeable or lovable anymore. Some people never really lose their old sensibilities, and some people may be so changeable that it is inapt to describe them as ever having a sensibility at all. Nevertheless, re-keying sensibility change (and the bemusement it brings in its wake) seems to be a relatively widespread phenomenon.

One might doubt that losing one's grip on the intelligibility of an earlier emotional apprehension amounts to all that important of an epistemic loss. And it is true that from the perspective of someone who regards their old emotional apprehensions as illusory,

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Hume himself maintains that we cannot overcome variation in sensibility that is due to different life stages, although it is not clear that he means to doubt our access to the experiences of our prior selves: "At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty. Vainly would we, in such cases, endeavour to enter into the sentiments of others, and divest ourselves of those propensities, which are natural to us" (1985 [1777], pp. 244–245).

<sup>26</sup> I will not argue the point here, but I believe that this 'crowding out' dynamic also explains the imaginative resistance that sometimes arises when one engages with fictional work. See Gendler and Liao (2016) for an overview of the so-called puzzle of imaginative resistance.

this intelligibility loss might serve as welcome evidence of just how much more accurately their emotional register of things' evaluative properties has become. However, losing one's grasp on the intelligibility of a prior emotional evaluative apprehension does not necessarily entail surrendering the complementary evaluative judgment. Just as our tree-hater might have thought that his companions' awe was more fitting than his own detestation, I might think that I have become a dullard, and that my prior aesthetic sensibility was better attuned to the truly wonderful than my current minimalist one is. Suppose that I still believe some object is wonderful in virtue of its frilliness, though I cannot now emotionally apprehend it as such. My conversion to minimalism will in that case look seriously epistemically costly to me. From that perspective, the transformation of my sensibility did not just cost me a grasp on the *apparent* fittingness of my prior emotional apprehensions. Rather, it cost me a grasp on their actual fittingness. I have not forgotten that the object is wonderful, but I cannot see for myself how it calls out for wondering admiration. We can say that I have lost my appreciation of its wonderful quality.<sup>27</sup>

Some people will never entertain such regrets about past sensibility changes. No will they regard an impending sensibility shift as something that might blind them to evaluative properties that they now apprehend. One's understanding of the epistemic stakes will depend upon one's metaphysics of value. If a person thinks that things' evaluative properties are inevitably and universally metaphysically dependent upon her actual sensibilities, then she will think that no change in sensibility could ever prevent her from accurately apprehending evaluative properties. There will be no need to fear that in becoming a different kind of person she will lose her appreciation of some evaluative properties, because things' evaluative properties will inevitably change in lockstep with her changing sensibilities. Most people do not embrace that sort of subjectivism, though, at least not for all kinds of evaluative properties. We are convinced that our loved ones are precious, and would continue to be precious even if we were no longer emotionally receptive to their charms. We trust that there are horrors and beauties that we are not currently emotionally equipped to appreciate, and sometimes we aspire to develop new sensibilities that will allow us to bring those values into view. The thought that our individual sensibilities can count as better or more poorly attuned to at least some evaluative properties has broad appeal. It is compatible with a wide variety of views about values' metaphysical grounding, and while it is consistent with absolutism about value, it does not entail it.

I have claimed that at least some sensibility changes will cause us to lose a grip on the intelligibility of our prior evaluative apprehensions. If we accept what I have just characterized as an appealing thought about the metaphysics of value, then we should also think that losing a grip on the intelligibility of our prior evaluative apprehensions will (at least sometimes) entail losing our appreciation of a real evaluative property or properties.<sup>28</sup> We will cease to grasp the actual fittingness of our prior emotional

<sup>27</sup> Balog (2020) compellingly argues that we appreciate 'sensuous' values only by perceptually or affectively encountering them.

<sup>28</sup> Montero (2012, p. 67) briefly but intriguingly speculates that some ways of improving our sensitivity to some aesthetic properties of dance performance risk diminishing our sensitivity to its other aesthetic properties. I suspect that many actual sensibility changes involve a kind of trade-off, where an enhanced

apprehensions. It remains to show how this newly exposed epistemic downside is relevant to the authenticity problem.

First, recall the deliberative aspiration upon which the authenticity problem is meant to turn. The enemy of authenticity (in Paul's sense) is epistemic alienation. If some value or care is unknown to me, or if I do not have a first-personal grasp on it, that will generate a problem for my choosing to or from it authentically. We ideally want our choices about future experiences to be based on a first-personal grasp of the subjective value of those experiences. An experience's subjective value for us "depends upon what we care about" (Paul, 2014, p. 15). Paul mentions an experience's hedonic quality, its intensity, and its revelatory potency as features of experience that might matter to its subjective value, but those need not be the sole determinants or constituents of subjective value (Paul, 2014, pp. 35, 114).

Second, consider: one feature of experience that people tend to care about is veridicality. We believe our experiences will be better *qua* experiences if they are not illusory. In the case of emotional experience, that means we want our emotional apprehensions to be fitting. When thinking about future sensibilities we might have, and about the subjective value of experiences colored by those sensibilities, most of us will be at least somewhat concerned with whether our future experiences will involve appreciating things' actual evaluative properties. We are distressed when we catch ourselves losing emotional sensitivity to what we think of as real horrors and real beauties, and we are reluctant to experience things in what we believe to be a non-veridical way. To illustrate: in a time of massive ecological destruction, a person insensitive to natural beauty might end up feeling happier than someone who is acutely aware of the splendors that are extinguished every day. The former way of being would surely tempt few people who value being emotionally attuned to the beauty of nature, though. From their perspective, becoming that kind of person would mean ceasing to appreciate something real and important.

I propose that for many people, the actual fittingness of the evaluative apprehensions involved is one of the features that constitutes an emotionally-changed experience's subjective value. Interestingly, Paul herself indicates that an experience's veridicality might make a difference to its subjective value: "I will assume that an experience has this sort of value [subjective value] only when it correctly represents what's in the world or it is produced in the right way" (2014, p. 12). Paul stops short of saying that an experience's veridicality could partly *constitute* its subjective value, and she does not explicitly include evaluative properties as features that could be correctly represented. But since it is a feature of experience that is personally important to us, and since Paul already allows that veridicality can make a difference to subjective value, it seems natural to count fittingness among the features that sometimes help to constitute emotional experiences' subjective value.

Suppose that is correct: the fittingness of our emotional evaluative apprehensions at least sometimes partly constitutes the subjective value of a future experience or pattern of experiences. Suppose further, in keeping with Paul's conception of authenticity, that choosing authentically entails fully grasping the subjective value of our possible

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Footnote 28 continued

appreciation of some real evaluative properties comes at the price of an at least temporarily dulled appreciation of other real evaluative properties.



future experiences. In that case, choosing authentically will sometimes require grasping the fittingness of our possible future emotional evaluative apprehensions. If we are epistemically alienated from a feature of an experience that helps to constitute its overall subjective value, then our choice of that experience cannot be completely authentic. To return just once more to the now rather threadbare example of Rococo art: perhaps I accurately remember how much I admired those works, and I have a quite vivid memory of how that admiration felt. Perhaps I even have it on good authority (including—why not—the authority of my former self) that they are fitting to admire. I believe in the fittingness of my prior admiration, but still, I cannot now grasp that fittingness. By the same token, I cannot grasp the fittingness of the admiration I would feel were I to somehow re-acquire my old sensibility. If I care about having emotional experiences that involve fitting evaluative apprehension, then there is an aspect of my possible future experiences' subjective value that escapes my grasp. The choice to re-acquire my old sensibility will in this case not *make perfect sense* to me. Neither my prior experience nor the what-it's-like knowledge I gleaned from it will allow me to avoid a version of the authenticity problem.

## 6 Conclusion

In “The beginning of the end,” Gerard Manley Hopkins describes “The sceptic disappointment and the loss/A boy feels when the poet he pores upon/Grows less and less sweet to him, and knows no cause.” When one’s sensibility begins to turn, or when one contemplates some life transformation that will involve a sensibility change, one loss one might mourn or fear is that of the ‘sweetness’ of experiences colored by the older sensibility. Hopkins’ young reader is losing a source of enjoyment. But there are other, less obvious costs as well. First, changing our sensibilities may make it harder for us to remember accurately and vividly what experiences colored by our prior sensibilities were like. The boy may forget just what it was like to read his treasured poems. The boy’s feelings of loss and disappointment would presumably not be fully relieved by an assurance that he will remember what it felt like to read the poet’s work, though. There is something else to be saddened by, here, namely his weakening grip on what he now takes to be the sweetness of the poems themselves. He has not changed his mind about the poems’ goodness (he “knows no cause” for his fading enjoyment), but soon that goodness will cease to be something he can picture for himself; he will cease to appreciate it, and he will eventually change enough to be puzzled by his past poetic passion. Recognizing the potential impermanence of our both our experiential knowledge and our appreciation of values can help us to more fully to explain why transformative choice is so fraught, even if we do not ascribe to Paul’s particular ideal of authenticity. But for those who do find the ideal attractive, I hope to have shown that it will be still harder to live up to than it at first appeared.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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