TLS

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

The leading international forum for literary culture

All the same

AMIA SRINIVASAN

" The goals we pursue are always veiled", Milan Kundera wrote in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). "A girl who longs for marriage longs for something she knows nothing about. The boy who hankers after fame has no idea what fame is. The thing that gives our every move its meaning is always totally unknown to us." Kundera was exaggerating. Unmarried people know a lot about marriage, and even nobodies know something about fame. We know that both marriage and fame have their satisfactions, but also that the happiness they bring can be short-lived; that a marriage without companionship, like fame without merit, is a castle built on sand. So in what sense are these things "totally unknown to us"? Kundera might say: the unwed and the nobodies doubtless know a great many objective facts about marriage and fame, but they still don't know *what it's like* to be married or famous. Some things can only be fully known from the inside. And this includes the most important things, the things that give our lives and choices their meaning.

In 1982, two years before the publication of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the philosopher Frank Jackson described a thought experiment in which a brilliant scientist named Mary lives her entire life in a black-and-white room, learning everything there is to know about the science of vision from black-and-white textbooks. (Anyone who has seen Alex Garland's recent film *Ex Machina* will recognize the case, though Jackson goes uncited.) Mary knows exactly how different wavelengths stimulate the retina, how the brain processes this visual information, and how normal people use words such as "red" and "green" to describe their visual experiences. Nonetheless, Jackson argued, if Mary were to walk out into the real world, she would learn something new. For the first time, she would learn what colours *look* like; for the first time, she would know what it is to experience red from the inside. Perhaps Kundera thought that the husband-hunting girl and the fame-lusting boy are like deluded Marys: they yearn for redness without even knowing what it looks like.

If L. A. Paul is right, then we are all in Mary's black-and-white room, trying to decide whether or not to have experiences we haven't had, and so don't really understand. The upshot is that many of our decisions cannot be made rationally: we can't rationally choose to have experiences we don't understand, but equally we can't rationally choose not to have such experiences. By "rationally" Paul means according to the dictates of normative decision theory, the area of philosophy and economics that offers a formal algorithm for how self-interested creatures should make decisions. (Most philosophers think that rationality extends beyond self-interest, but decision theory only concerns "rationality" in the narrow, self-interested sense.) Normative decision theory tells us that we should choose the action that has the highest expected value. So if I'm deciding whether to go and see a new film, I should think about how happy it will make me if it's good, how miserable it will make me if it's bad, and weigh each of those outcomes by how probable I think it is. If going to see the film has the higher expected value, then I should head to the cinema; if not, I should stay at home. Paul's worry is this: if we can't know what experiences are like unless we've already had them, then we can't know how happy or miserable they would make us, and so can't know which numbers to plug into our decision-making algorithm. In the language of decision theory, if I can't know what possible outcomes would be like, then I can't know what values to assign to them, and therefore can't determine which action maximizes expected value.

Choosing whether to have novel experience is like deciding whether to buy a lottery ticket without knowing how much prize money is at stake.

It's not clear that this is a damning problem for decision theory. I've never had an allexpenses-paid holiday to Bora Bora. I don't know what that experience is like "from the inside". But I'm confident that I'd enjoy it immensely. I'm also confident that I wouldn't much enjoy being mauled by a shark, though I've never had that experience either. Actually experiencing either of these things doesn't seem necessary for working out how much I should value or disvalue them. Paul concedes that this is true of many, perhaps most, experiences: we don't have to know what they're like to know how much to value them. But she insists that a special class of experiences – a class that includes having a child, going to war, moving to a foreign country, and taking LSD – aren't like this. If we're to know how much to value these experiences, we need to know exactly what they're like.

What makes having a child different in this respect from being mauled by a shark? Even if we don't have first-hand experience of parenthood, after all, we still have plenty of information on which to draw. Frank parents will tell you all about the particular mixture of intense love, routine and exhaustion that the experience involves. You might not know exactly what they're talking about, but you don't hear it as pure nonsense either. The same goes for anecdotal accounts of war, emigration or LSD. They might not take us right inside the experience, but they can get us pretty close. (What is a novelist like Kundera doing if not showing us something of what it is like to live and love under totalitarianism?) With a little research and forethought, you can also gain a reasonably clear idea of how having children would change your economic circumstances, your professional prospects, your leisure time, your relationship with your partner, and the kinds of practical and moral challenge you face. Psychological research might even help you to predict how happy parenthood would make you. (To be fair, the results of parental happiness studies are mixed, though it's clear that everyone loves being a grandparent.) We don't know everything, but there's plenty we do and can know about parenthood. Isn't that enough to decide whether it's for us?

Paul thinks it isn't. How do you know, she asks, that all this third-party evidence – friends' anecdotes and the deliverances of empirical psychology – applies to you? Maybe you are totally unlike other people: maybe you will be apathetic about your children, where your friends feel obsessive love. Given this possibility, Paul argues, you shouldn't use information about other people in order to make decisions about yourself. But by this reasoning, you shouldn't use the fact that other people haven't enjoyed being mauled by sharks as evidence that you wouldn't: maybe you would experience it as an ecstatic thrill. If the possibility that I am not like most other people undermines my ability to make rational decisions on the basis of third-party evidence, then it follows that I can't rationally choose not to be mauled by a shark. That would be an odd result.

In any case, Paul seems to have a deeper worry about the use of third-party evidence for first-person decision-making. She suggests that it can be "inauthentic" to draw on such data in making our decisions; doing so, she says, risks giving up personal ownership of our choices. When we make decisions "for ourselves", we project ourselves into imaginary scenarios to discover how we'd feel about them; we don't allow the question to be settled by the latest happiness study. So Paul's worry isn't that there is no rational way to make life decisions, but instead that subjecting our life decisions to rational scrutiny is existentially problematic: an act of self-alienation.

Paul is right that there can be something dissonant in using third-party evidence to make a personal decision, especially when what you imagine is different from what others tell you. Suppose you imagine having a child, and all you can see is an owl-eyed infant, and then a scampering toddler, and finally the crisp autumn day when you drop your wunderkind off for her first day at university. Your parent friends tell you instead about sleepless nights and tantrums and sour-faced adolescence. But you can't internalize it; the projection won't budge. You can't help feeling that for you it would be different, that for you it would be unpunctuated bliss. The question is: would it be worryingly inauthentic of you, as Paul suggests, to listen to your friends and discount your happy imaginings? Or, on the contrary, would it be inauthentic of you *not* to do so?

Study after study shows that we all think we're special: the average person thinks that he or she is smarter, better-looking and more talented than average. Most drivers think they are better and safer drivers than average. Thinking you're special is part of what it means to be just like everyone else. The really special people

are those who don't think they're special: studies suggest that depressed people have an uncanny sense of how average they are. Perhaps, then, an authentic relationship to ourselves requires us to recognize the ways in which we are not special, including our predictable insistence on our own uniqueness. Authenticity requires us to be able to take what P. F. Strawson has called an "objective stance" even towards ourselves. Paul is right when she says that reconciling the subjective and objective stances – seeing ourselves both from the inside and from without – is enormously difficult. But all the same, authenticity in the age of Big Data might require me to do the difficult thing, and to see myself sometimes as just another statistic.

There is another way that having children and being mauled by a shark might differ. Before you've been mauled by a shark, you have a strong preference not to be; and that preference probably won't shift once you've been mauled. Having a child, however, often does change our preferences, and changes them profoundly. Before having children, we might strongly value spending time alone or in pursuit of professional ambitions. But after having children, spending time with them and pursuing their well-being might trump everything else. Some experiences can alter us radically and permanently; not just what we value, but who we take ourselves to be. Paul calls such experiences "personally transformative". Not only do I learn what they're like only once I have them: having them also changes what it's like to be me. Not only that; these experiences change us in totally unpredictable ways. All this uncertainty, Paul argues, makes it doubly impossible to decide rationally whether to have such experiences.

Again, I think the significant issue here is not about the rationality of decision-making, but about the ethics of making decisions rationally. Paul insists that, just as I have no idea what it would be like to have a child, I have no idea how having a child would change what it's like to be me. But surely this is wrong. I have watched many friends and family members become parents. I can see how they've changed. And unless I'm special (the odds are that I'm not), I, too, would change in similar ways. I'd find unknown reservoirs of energy; I'd smile wistfully when childless friends told me about their spontaneous nights out; I'd start carrying wet wipes with me at all times. The worry is not that I don't know how I might change, but that it's so predictable how I would change. The worry isn't epistemic, but existential: is this the person I should choose to become?

Some experiences can transform us so much that to choose them feels like betrayal or suicide. That's because our sense of who we are is bound up with the things we value. Our preferences and tastes – in books, clothes, movies, music, leisure, food – aren't just arbitrary facts about us. When we change our values, we change ourselves. At the limit, we may become unrecognizable to our former selves; we might even make new selves, killing off the old. The prospect of such a change can be painful even when we make no judgement on the prospective self. I might see nothing morally wrong with being a homebody, but if I'm a committed hedonist, then the prospect of turning into someone who just wants to stay in will be unwelcome, not because I think I would thereby turn into a bad person, but because I will have become a different person, a person who does not share my values, a person with whom I cannot identify. This is so even though I know *that* person will feel content to have put aside the childish things that thrill the present me. What I see as an act of self-betrayal, this other person, this other-me, sees as growing up. Which of us is right?

This is a deep issue, and one that decision theory cannot resolve. But that isn't because of any failure on its part; decision theory is simply silent on the question of how we should value the selves we might become. That question has always been for us, not the algorithm.