[part title recto]

**PART FOUR**

**WELLBEING, SELFHOOD, AND ROLES**

Abstract

What is the relation between roles and the human good? Between our construction, maintenance, and enaction of institutions, and the life which goes well for the person whose life it is? This chapter reads selected martial autobiographies to explore three relations and what they mean for the nature of the good:

1. *Tools for self-shaping*: roles are social technology for shaping ourselves towards good understood as fulfilment of desires which are independent of those roles.
2. *Good-making practices*: roles are parts of good-making practices which transform individuals by creating goods and initiating individuals into them.
3. *Self-discovery*: roles are a method for gaining self-knowledge. They help each of us discover her unchosen, seedlike, initially opaque self, and thereby discover her particular good, which is that self’s realization.

The chapter concludes that some roles’ relation to the good is that they test and reveal the self and therefore its good.

Keywords

ethics, roles, practices, the human good, social technology, self-discovery, self-realization, martial autobiography

<recto>13

**Three Relations Between Roles and the Good**

*Samuel Clark*

**1. My Interests, Plan, and Method**

I’ll begin with where I am coming from, by comparison with Michael Hardimon’s title for his classic paper ‘Role Obligations’ (Hardimon [1994](#B11)). First, *roles*: before joining the research network which eventually gave rise to this volume, I had not thought about roles as such. I had thought and written about what I now realize can usefully be collected together as *particular* roles: parent, child, soldier, employee, craftsman (Clark [2010](#B3), [2012](#B4), [2013](#B5), [2017](#B6)). This chapter is therefore partly exploration of territory which is new to me, partly redeployment of work towards my book *Good Lives* (Clark [2021](#B7)), all in service of my own concerns about human selfhood, reflexivity, good, and practical rationality, as they relate to roles.—

Second, *obligations*: I agree with Bernard Williams ([2005](#B26)) in thinking that both contemporary Western liberal morality and contemporary anglophone moral philosophy are over-focused on obligations, which are only one part of the ethical landscape, and shouldn’t be allowed to take over more of it. I am interested instead in the good life, that is, *what it is for someone’s life to go well for her*, also known as well-being, welfare, prudential value, the good life, etc.

So, on the one hand, I join Hardimon and this volume in their focus on roles; but on the other, I depart from his almost complete attention to the *obligations* associated with roles.

My planis toexplore relations between *roles* and the *human good* by investigating three ways they might fit together. Roles could be:

1. Tools for self-shaping towards a good understood as desire-fulfilment, and thus as independent of the means used to pursue it.
2. Parts of good-making practices which transform individuals by creating goods and initiating those individuals into them.
3. Methods for self-discovery which begin and direct the achievement of the good understood as self-realization.

My aim is to show that roles are methods of self-discovery in some real cases, and that this is evidence that the good is *self-realization* (not desire-fulfilment, not just created by institutions, and not wholly up to us).

A remark on method: lots of my work, including this, is about and draws on *autobiographies*—here, specifically *martial* autobiographies, and even more specifically James Salter’s autobiography *Burning the Days* (Salter [2014](#B19)), backed up and contrasted by autobiographies by Tim O’Brien ([2003](#B15)) and Siegfried Sassoon (Sassoon [1937](#B20)). I am not going to say much in defence of that method in general—I am just going to bring my particular texts and examples in as I need them, do what I want to do with them, and hope that they show their value in practice. I do want to say, though, that an underappreciated part of the work of philosophy is not *argument* in the sense of movement from premises to conclusion, but *showing*: displaying a distinctive way of grasping some phenomena as vivid and coherent. Autobiographies are good at doing that for the particular phenomena I am interested in, and the first-personal character of this chapter draws on that strength.

**2. Relation 1: Tools for Self-shaping**

On this first account, roles are *social technology* for shaping ourselves towards a good life understood as the fulfilment of desires which are independent of those roles. I will unpack that thought by example (not yet a martial autobiography example, for reasons which will become clearer).

*Cycling club*: I want to improve my general fitness, get some fresh air, and meet some new people. So I join my local cycling club, Lancaster and South Lakes CTC.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Taking on this role of *CTC member* recruits a variety of causally effective objects and processes to help fulfil my desires: infrastructure like a club-house and a tool library; collections of information and expertise; mechanisms of habit-formation and routine such as regular Thursday rides; the motivational forces of friendly competition and public commitment; and so on.

If taking on this role works, it helps me change myself in accordance with my reflexive desires—I get fitter, as I wanted, by recruiting the world’s and other people’s causal powers to act on me. But taking on the role doesn’t typically change my desires: they’re given prior to and independently of the cycling club; the cycling club is just a contingent means towards fulfilling them. I could instead join park runs, or just go cycling on my own. The cycling club is a tool, to be judged by its effectiveness compared to alternative tools.

Making explicit the assumed account of the good and my action towards it here: good is desire-fulfilment; rational action, including taking on roles, is instrumental.

Now consider another example:

*Army*: I want to improve my general fitness, get some fresh air, and meet some new people. So, I join the army. Here’s James Salter arriving at West Point in July 1942:

It was the hard school, the forge. To enter you passed, that first day, into an inferno. Demands, many of them incomprehensible, rained down. Always at rigid attention, hair freshly cropped, chin withdrawn and trembling, barked at by unseen voices, we stood or ran like insects from one place to another, two or three times to the Cadet Store, returning with piles of clothing and equipment. Some had the courage to quit immediately, others slowly failed. Someone’s roommate, on the third trip to the store, hadn’t come back but had simply gone on and out the gate a mile away. That afternoon we were formed up in new uniforms and marched to Trophy Point to be sworn in. (Salter [2014](#B19), 47)

This is one version of a familiar account: military basic training is *typically* described autobiographically in terms like ‘forge’, ‘inferno’, ‘destruct-testing’. This is recognizable to anyone who has read a martial autobiography, or seen *Full Metal Jacket*, or *An Officer and a Gentleman*, or *Tigerland*,or any of a number of other films in their genre.

**3.Transformative Roles**

Why is it funny or odd to think of pursuing my desire to get some fresh air etc. by joining the army? Partly because it’s disproportionate to my weak-sounding desires: it’s a hammer to crack a nut. But it also sounds perverse because of a significant distinction between *non-transformative* and *transformative* roles. Here’s an example of a non-transformative role: I have played Father Christmas at my children’s school Christmas fair (this is actually true, unlike *cycling club* or *army*). I put on the costume to pursue some desires I happened to have, to amuse children and to support my wife in her role as PTA chair; I took the costume off again when they were fulfilled; the red suit went back in the PTA cupboard; I was unchanged.

But compare the role of *soldier*: to join the army isn’t just a way of trying to fulfil desires one already has, it’s opening oneself to being remade—to being turned into someone with different desires, and therefore with a different good. And that’s why it’s odd to use the army, unlike using the cycling club, as a merely contingent tool for fulfilling prior and independent desires.

An objector interrupts: couldn’t joining the cycling club be transformative? Couldn’t playing Father Christmas be transformative at the right moment? Perhaps it’s when I realize that I really want to work with children, and change careers.

I reply: yes, that’s true, because being transformative is a *relation* between a role and a particular person, not an intrinsic property of the role. Playing Father Christmas was not in fact *transformative-for-me*, but it might have been for someone else, or for me at another time. That said, some roles are *typically* transformative, that is, transformative-in-fact for a wide variety of people, and *soldier* is one of them, by design. Indeed, *soldier* is an important sub-type of a class of typically transformative roles: *ascetic roles.* Being a *soldier* is a form of (what I label) *regular* asceticism: one joins a totalizing rule-governed community, in which one lives in public, without individual property, and works collectively for some good which the community shares, maintains, and expresses. The other common example of regular asceticism is being a monk or a nun, and this isn’t a coincidence: early *Christian* monasticism, at least, was modelled on soldiering. One of the earliest monasteries, as distinguished from loose temporary groupings of hermits, was founded in the Syrian desert round the fourth century ce by St Pachomius. He had been a Roman legionary, and knew how to organize people to live in a hostile environment: an army camp under a formal, codified rule and roster of duties, enforced by whoever enacts the role of ‘abbot’ (Rousseau [1999](#B18)). I will use regular ascetic roles as a continuing example throughout the rest of this chapter.

The existence of transformative roles—including, but not limited to, regular ascetic roles—is a problem for relation 1. At least, it limits that relation’s application to a subclass of roles, where I wanted a general account. My relation 2 offers a solution to that problem.

**4.Relation 2: Good-making Practices**

At least about this regular ascetic kind of role, it’s tempting to say that they are parts of collective practices which create and sustain the good for those within them.[[2]](#footnote-3) That means two things. First, these roles give individuals who take them on goods they wouldn’t otherwise have: to be initiated into a transformative role is to have one’s goods radically changed. Here is Salter again, later in his West Point career:

I was undergoing a conversion, from a self divided and consciously inferior . . . to one that was unified and . . . right . . . There were images of the struggle in the air on every side, the fighter pilots back from missions deep into Europe, rendezvous times still written in ink on the backs of their hands, gunners with shawls of bullets over their shoulders, grinning and risky[.] I saw them, I saw myself, in the rattle and thunder of takeoff, the world of warm cots, cigarettes, stand-downs, everything that had mattered falling away . . . More than anything I felt the desire to be rid of the undistinguished past, to belong to nothing and to no one beyond the war. At the same time I longed for the opposite, country, family, God, perhaps not in that order. In death I would have them or be done with the need; I would be at last the other I yearned to be. (Salter [2014](#B19), 70‒71)

This *constitutive* account further means, second, that the institution *creates* those goods: these things are only good because the institution and its roles exist. A regular ascetic transformative institution isn’t just a mechanism for changing people’s good; it’s a *creator* of goods with an associated mechanism for initiating people into them. Other institutions have the same properties: they turn what would otherwise be bare states and possibilities and movements into *goods*, and into *actions* aiming at them, by placing them in a structure which makes sense of them as parts of a whole. Rational action, then, is not merely instrumental, but *historical*: what makes a movement an action at all, and therefore subject to standards of rationality and irrationality, is its place in a history which explains it.

So, on this account, the institution is necessary to the good into which the individual who takes on one of its roles is initiated. It isn’t just a means to recognizing and having some good, it constitutes that good and rational action towards it.

**5. Experiences of Recognition and Resistance**

Even if relation 2 solves the problem of transformative roles for relation 1, it has its own problems. Consider Salter’s conversion again. In his first year at West Point he is nearly the worst cadet in the school, continually bumping up against and ineffectually resisting the institution. He experiences it as completely wrong for him, an ugly, oppressive, shaming intrusion. Plenty of other recruits have had the same experience—Tim O’Brien ([2003](#B15)) describes it vividly in his *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, for example. Unlike O’Brien, Salter does eventually find that West Point fits him, or perhaps he finds a way to make himself fit it, by adopting a Romantic ideal of the company commander which he finds in a German military science text:

This youthful but experienced figure was nothing less than a living example to each of his men. Alone, half obscured by those he commanded, similar to them but without their faults, self-disciplined, modest, cheerful, he was at the same time both master and servant, each of admirable character. His real authority was not based on shoulder straps or rank but on a model life which granted the right to demand anything from others. (Salter [2014](#B19), 68)

Siegfried Sassoon, for just one other example, had a similar ideal at the beginning of the First World War (Sassoon [1937](#B20)). For Salter, this figure isn’t just a hero to admire or to emulate, as perhaps it was for Sassoon. It’s a delighted self-recognition:

I knew this hypothetical figure. I had seen him as a schoolboy, latent among the sixth formers, and at times had caught a glimpse of him at West Point. Stroke by stroke, the description of him was like a portrait emerging. I was almost afraid to recognize the face. In it was no self-importance; that had been thrown away, we are beyond that, stripped of it. When I read that among the desired traits of the leader was a sense of humor that marked a balanced and indomitable outlook, when I realized that every quality was one in which I instinctively had faith, I felt an overwhelming happiness, like seeing a card you cannot believe you are lucky enough to have drawn, at this moment, in this game. I did not dare to believe it but I imagined, I thought, I somehow dreamed, the face was my own. (Salter [2014](#B19), 69)

This is Salter’s individual response as a singular human being, but it maps to some common human possibilities of response to regular ascetic and other transformation: experiences of deep unfittingness or of deep fittingness, or of both sequentially. I want to say: these are experiences of discovery, of *self-revelation*—literally, revealing something about the subject of initiation to themselves through how they react to that initiation. Sometimes, regular ascetic institutions are explicitly recruited as means of self-revelation—Sassoon, for example, joined up to find out whether he was just the drone he appeared to be. But even when that’s not so—Salter joined up just to please his father—that is one of the things these roles do to us, whether we want them to or not. They’re a method of *self-discovery* by probing or testing for the fittingness or unfittingness response.

**6. Relation 3: Self-discovery and Self-realization**

On this third relation of roles and the good, some roles are a method of self-discovery, that is a mechanism for gaining self-knowledge. Such a role can help the individual who tries it on to discover her unchosen, seedlike, initially opaque self, and thereby to discover her particular good, which is that self’s development from latency to completion and expression: her *self-realization.* This is the view of the self, its good, and our knowledge—self-knowledge—about them that I defend in *Good Lives* (Clark [2021](#B7)). My three main ideas here are *self-knowledge*,the *self*, and *the human good*, and I’ll now consider them individually.

*Self-knowledge*

Recent philosophical debate under the heading ‘self-knowledge’ has been about an epistemic question, the nature of my knowledge of my current mental states. Is it unmediated? Transparent? Infallible? Incorrigible? Is it like or unlike my knowledge of other people’s current mental states? In contrast, I’m interested in *substantial* self-knowledge (Cassam [2014](#B2)): answers to questions like *who am I? What am I? What’s my character—am I brave, selfish, creative, lazy? How would I react in a crisis or under threat? What is in me that I need to express? What do I really want and really believe? What would make my life a success for me? Why did I do what I have done? Did I make the right choices? Why has my life gone the way it has—is it down to me or down to the world?* I think, with Quassim Cassam, that most people who aren’t professional philosophers are interested in this kind of self-knowledge—answers that would satisfy the ‘Delphic demand’ to *know yourself*—rather than the philosopher’s epistemic question.

I claim, then, that trying on a transformative role like *soldier* is a way of pursuing substantial self-knowledge: to join up or be drafted is a way of finding out what you’re made of.

An objector interrupts: what we’re dealing with here is story-telling, not self-discovery. It’s making something, not responding to what’s already there, so talk of self-*knowledge* rather than self*-creation* or self-*invention* is misplaced.

I reply: the reported *phenomenology* in martial autobiographies, and in other autobiographies of transformation, is of inward-looking response to something unexpected and demanding, not of outward-looking free invention. This is a common phenomenology across otherwise different and singular people. We can also see it, for just one example, in Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (Gosse [1983](#B10)).

Objector: it’s not a story *then*, it’s a story in Salter or Gosse or whoever, telling it in their autobiographies. Who knows what it was then, if anything, but the later autobiographical telling is a retrospective invention along conventional, generic lines which also appear in plenty of novels and films, and which have a history and a cultural location.

Reply: I take the objector’s view to be that the self is not an object, ‘out there’ in the world or deep ‘inside’ me or you, to be uncovered and represented in autobiographical narrative. She claims that *the self is a self-interpretation in autobiographical form*, and that the object of self-knowledge is *created* by narrating oneself into being, not revealed. Views of this broad type are held, for example, by Charles Taylor ([1989](#B25)), Marya Schechtman ([1996](#B21)), Mark Freeman ([1993](#B9)), and Jerome Bruner ([2004](#B1)), and in the existentialist tradition.

On this picture, self-knowledge isn’t like other kinds of knowledge, or at least it’s not like our ordinary picture of knowledge: it’s not a representation of, or a deferential response to, or a way of catching or grasping, anything there in advance of investigation, which we might *mis*represent or *mis*interpret. This picture will be made clearer by two analogies. First, an error theory of self-knowledge. The Delphic demand asks us to uncover something which is just not there to be uncovered: a real self. To find the demand compelling—as so many of us do—is to make a mistake. Where an error theory of moral language claims that we talk about and search for a non-existent moral reality, independent of our moral practices, this error theory of self-knowledge claims that we talk about and search for a non-existent self, independent of our practices of self-interpretation and self-representation. Second, a response to scepticism with a Kantian flavour: if self-knowledge is taken as grasping something independently there, then the road to scepticism is left open, because we might be permanently opaque to ourselves, or such that our self-representations are unavoidably distorted beyond the possibility of knowing ourselves. Maybe our powers of understanding cannot reach to things as they are here. The response is then to argue that the objects of knowledge are constructed by those powers. What we know about ourselves is made not found. The transcendental argument could go: self-knowledge cannot be impossible; if the self were independent of our powers of understanding it might be; so, the self is not independent of, but is constructed by, those powers.

I have two replies to this objection, distinguished by how the objector conceives the self. First, self as persona. Schechtman connects self-narration to our construction of a *social* self which allows us to live in our particular kind of society. We—me, and, I expect, you my readers—live in a commercial, literate, rule-of-law governed society, which understands some creatures, and some artificial things like universities, limited liability companies, and cycling clubs, as continuing entities with rights and duties. They are able to hold assets, to make contracts, to be held to account, to sue and be sued, to plan and invest for their future interests. That is, they are entities which have *legal* personality, a *persona* in the sense of the mask which an actor in classical Greek theatre wears in order to inhabit a dramatic role.

So, my objector could mean that autobiographical narrative creates a persona*.* And this could be true: personae are perhaps sometimes or partly created by autobiographical narration, although they are also made by dialogue, by inhabiting institutional roles, by picking up local stereotypes and ready-mades, and by social assignment (as for example when an infant or a corporate body is a legal person for ownership purposes). But whether or not that is true, the persona isn’t the self we wanted self-knowledge about, the self for which life goes well or badly, because it makes sense to worry—and sometimes it is true—that my masks hide or distort the real me, and thereby do me harm. Self-knowledge then requires looking behind the persona, and self-realization requires taking it off. We can see examples of this especially in slave narratives (e.g. Douglass [1986](#B8)) and in some women’s autobiographies (e.g. Lessing [1995](#B13)).

However, this doesn’t completely deal with the objection. Some of my objectors—Bruner, for example—should be satisfied with it, because by ‘self’ they mean ‘self-*concept*’: how I represent myself to myself or think about myself. But other narrativists mean something deeper than ‘my persona is my autobiographical self-interpretation’. For Charles Taylor in particular, the consequential questions about living a human life well only come into play at all when we interpret ourselves into existence. There is no self to which standards of life’s going well or badly apply, prior to reflection on the self.

I therefore need a second reply: pluralist realism about self-knowledge. I can accept for the sake of argument that self-interpretation creates the object of one particular kind of self-knowledge, a self-interpretation. Perhaps it is knowledge of what my life means to me, or of how I evaluate myself. But I want to defend the genuine experience of *self-discovery*, which reveals the self as unchosen, seedlike, and initially opaque. That is, as something there which we must uncover by active enquiry, not something created by interpretation. My account is *pluralist* about three things: about *kinds of self-knowledge*; about our *means for gaining* it; and about our *resources for representing* it. My account is *realist* in that it denies both the error theory and the Kantian accounts of self-interpretation. I argue that there is a self there prior to and independent of investigation, and that we can—with work—reveal it.

My argument for that account is: the more distinct methods of self-discovery we can identify, the less plausible the single, totalizing narrative self-interpretation account will look. The Delphic demand aims at self-knowledge of many different kinds, and we can pursue it using many different means.

I suggest, first, that a narrative self-interpretation is, at best, one among many kinds of self-knowledge, and not the most interesting to us. We can also gain knowledge of ourselves as unchosen, initially opaque things with distinctive potentials to be developed, expressed, and more or less skilfully handled. Second, that narrative self-interpretation is, at best, one of many ways we might gain self-knowledge, and not the most effective. In my book I argue for self-discovery by *pleasure* and by *solitary asceticism*; here I focus on self-discovery by *initiation into a regular ascetic role.*

The force of that depends, of course, on how compelling I can make each of these distinct kinds and methods of self-knowledge, and I cannot do anything more towards that now. So, I leave this as a plan and promise, and move on.

*Self*

‘Self’ is said in many different ways: it can mean separateness, immediate consciousness, mentality, essence, personhood, agency, the owner of one’s actions and states, self-conception, social identity, etc. I use ‘self’ to mean that thing, whatever it is, which is the subject of a human life, for which that life goes well or badly, and which is the thing known by the person with self-knowledge.

I claim that the experience of self-discovery through taking on regular ascetic roles shows that we should understand that self as unchosen, seedlike, and initially opaque to itself. The self is unchosen in that we experience it as discovered not invented—and that’s an accurate experience, because we’re not self-creating. It is seedlike in that discovery can be a kind of waking, a germination: a beginning of growth from mere potential or capacity into expression and action. Or it can be a recognition of unfittingness—that these are not the circumstances in which I can self-realize, as O’Brien discovers. It is initially opaque in that self-discovery is work. It requires a gradual process of uncovering and expression, and to know oneself is an achievement which not everyone manages, and which, perhaps, no one completes.

Objector: this is a metaphysically very costly account of the self. It seems to require some unified, unchanging, non-physical thing standing behind and owning all of the particular actions, experiences, and states of a human being. That is, it seems to be an appeal to a soul.

Reply: it would be too costly, if I were claiming that the self is like that (i.e. if I had a ‘further fact’ view about the self, in Parfit’s ([1984](#B16)) term). But I am not: *all* I am claiming is that the self has these three features, and I can be agnostic about how they’re realized. I can be perfectly happy with a reductionist account of the self, on which there is nothing more to it than the various physical and/or mental parts which make it up. I can be perfectly happy with the idea that a self just is a living, embodied human being. I do not need anything too metaphysically costly to claim what I am claiming.

*The Human Good*

In a slogan, ‘the good is the good of a self’: what’s good for some thing depends on what it is, so we can move from an account of the self to an account of the good. For example, L. W. Sumner makes this move in his *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Sumner [1996](#B24)): the self is essentially mental; so the good must be some mental state; and the obvious candidate is *happiness.* I make a parallel move, sharing Sumner’s structure but replacing his premise: the self is essentially seedlike, so the good must be its growth and flowering; that is, one’s self-realization.

So, the relation of roles to the good is that taking on a transformative role is a method of self-discovery that makes deliberate movement towards one’s own good possible, because I cannot plan my route to a destination before knowing what that destination is. Roles are not just tools for achievement of what’s already out in the open, and not just creators of good.

The good we can discover by taking on roles, and paying attention to our reactions to them, is *self-realization*: your life goes well for you when, and in the ways that, you develop and express your innate potential. That potential will overlap with the potential of other human beings, just because we’re so closely related to one another, but it will also have distinctive features which are individual to you, and shared with only some—or at the limit, no—other humans.

**7. Rational Action and Transformation**

What does this mean for rational action? I’ll address that question by comparison with L. A. Paul’s idea of transformative experience (Paul [2014](#B17)), and with the pictures of practical rationality implied by my first two relations between roles and the good.

‘Transformative experience’ is a technical term for a familiar phenomenon. Consider such experiences as becoming a parent, fighting in a war, or becoming chronically ill. They have two things in common:

First, they are *epistemically transformative*. Living through such a transformative experience provides a kind of knowledge only available by that first-personal acquaintance. Only a parent knows what it is like for her to have a child; only those who have fought know what combat is like for them (the claim is not that *nothing* can be known third-personally about these and other experiences, it is that *not everything* can be known that way).

Second, they are *personally transformative*. I am someone else after becoming a parent; the soldier is someone else after her baptism of fire; the ill person is not the same as her former, healthy self. We are not ‘someone else’ in the sense of having a new body, a new history, or a new legal personhood: Sassoon still had his private income after his war; I still had my limp after becoming a parent. But the transformed person at least has new personality traits and projects, and perhaps further has a new self: they become such that they no longer fully identify with their earlier self. I no longer fully identify with my pre-parenthood self, but have a more complex, alienated, sometimes uncomfortable relation to him, of pride, amused affection, awkward recognition, incomprehension, embarrassment, shame. That is, my life as a person is disunified over time by the transformative experiences I live through.

This is a repeated theme of, especially, martial autobiographies. For one example, Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and *Memoirs of a Military Officer* (in Sassoon [1937](#B20)) explain his life as a transition from innocence to experience, where the innocent pre-war fox-hunting Sassoon is an ironically presented ancestor to the author Sassoon who has lived through fighting in the trenches. Sassoon knows, of course, that he is the same human being as this naive young person he recalls; but he is not fully identified with that person.

For Paul, the fact of transformative experience in human lives has deep consequences for practical rationality, and in particular for planning for the future. Each of us wants to make rational decisions about our own futures, where ‘rational’ means intelligent, good, correct, successful rather than unintelligent, bad, mistaken, unsuccessful. But how? One popular and much-studied answer is: *maximize expected utility*. The *utility* (for you) of some state of the world is its value (for you). The *expected* utility of some possible future state is its percentage chance of occurring multiplied by its value. The expected utility of an action you might take is the sum of the expected utilities of all of its possible outcomes. The rational action to take is then that action, of those available to you, which has the highest expected utility. So, for example, the expected utility of buying a lottery ticket is:

(chance of winning x (prize – cost of ticket)) – (chance of losing x cost of ticket)

Given that the chance of winning is very small, the answer to this sum is negative; ‘don’t buy a ticket’ has a higher expected utility; and that is therefore the rational action of the two.

A standard criticism of this way of making decisions is that we usually do not know the relevant probabilities. Lotteries are very unusual in that we do. This is true, but we’re not completely in the dark in many cases, and decision theorists have developed sophisticated techniques for dealing with decisions under uncertainty (Steele and Stefánsson [2020](#B22)).

Paul’s distinct criticism is that we sometimes cannot know the other element of the expected utility calculation: you cannot know the value of outcomes for you in decisions about whether to undergo a transformative experience. Or at least, you cannot know that value if it depends, even partly, on what it will be like for you to have that experience, and on what you will then want or care about. This is for two reasons: first, transformative experiences are epistemically transformative, so you cannot know what it will be like to have such an experience until it’s too late to decide not to have it. Second, transformative experiences are personally transformative, so you will be someone else afterwards, with different responses, desires, and cares. So you cannot, even in principle, work out whether undergoing a transformative experience will maximize your expected utility. Each of us wants to make rational decisions about our own futures—whether or not to have children, whether or not to join up, how to respond to becoming chronically ill—but we do not know how.

This fact of transformative experience, and the fact of transformative roles which I have discussed here, both push in the same direction: against an instrumental account of practical rationality. We cannot plan for our own futures by taking our desires as given and working out what actions would best satisfy them, because some of the actions we could take, and some of the things which could happen to us, will change our desires in ways we cannot predict. They will change our selves. For roles in particular, the fact that some roles are transformative means that adopting such roles cannot just be a means to a preset goal. So, rational action is either not possible or more than just instrumental.

My response to the transformation problem with relation 1 between roles and the good was to suggest relation 2: roles are parts of good-making practices which transform individuals by creating goods and initiating those individuals into them. This is also a possible response to Paul’s criticism of instrumental rationality: perhaps we can plan for our futures by using existing roles to create our future goods. *Soldier* is typically a transformative role, which means that it would be a mistake to use it to pursue pre-existing desires and the good of satisfying them. But I could join up, not as a means of satisfying my current desires like *cycling club*,but as a way of giving myself a good by taking on a role in an institution which creates that good. That is, as a way of remaking myself into someone with that good. This new good isn’t dependent on what my desires now are, nor on what it would be like for me to experience that role, so my planning doesn’t fall to Paul’s problem.

My response to relation 2 was to appeal to responses of fittingness and unfittingness provoked by taking on transformative roles, especially in Salter’s autobiography, but intending to generalize the point. Taking on a transformative role can be a method of self-discovery as well as a method of self-transformation. In trying such a role on, I wake features and potentials in myself that I didn’t know I had; reveal my unchosen, initially opaque, seedlike self; and thereby discover my individual good, which is my individual self-realization.

Looking at transformative roles this way should also push us to rethink practical rationality as more substantive than the purely formal pictures I have associated with relations 1 and 2. Substantive accounts in general claim that some goals are intrinsically rational, in contrast with formal accounts, which claim that only *means* are rational are irrational, and that the *goals* they aim at are brute, arational givens, perhaps just desires. On this picture, as Hume says, it isn’t irrational to prefer my complete ruin to the least inconvenience to a stranger (Hume [1969](#B12), 463/book II part III section iii). One popular substantive account, the self-interest account, denies this: my own good is an intrinsically rational goal for me, and to fail to have it or to fail to act on it is in itself practically irrational.

On my substantive account of practical rationality, self-discovery and the self-development it enables are not merely things we might want alongside our other desires: they are partly constitutive of practical rationality for us. It’s intrinsically rational to find out what I am and to develop it, not merely rational as a means to some independent good, nor merely as governing what means we should pick if we happen to have those goals. It’s always rational to discover and develop myself. This doesn’t mean that it’s not rational to do other things, but it does mean that we can criticize as irrational someone who doesn’t care about or pursue her own self-discovery and self-realization. It can therefore be rational to take on a transformative role: not only as a means to achieve a preset goal; not only as a way of finding out what I’ll be like and what goals I’ll have after my transformation—if I happen to have the second-order goal to find that out; and not only to give myself a new good constituted by the role in its institution. Transformative roles are ways of discovering and realizing ourselves, and to that extent taking them on is an instrinsic, not merely instrumental, requirement of practical rationality.

**8. Conclusion**

On the picture I have developed here, what transformative roles do for us is offer mechanisms for self-realization via the possibility of self-discovery by finding a role individually fitting or unfitting. To try on the role of *soldier* is to probe myself for recognition of or resistance to it; to discover something about myself—a piece of substantial self-knowledge—through that response; and thereby to have an opportunity for self-realization. Perhaps being a soldier wakes something in me that needs to be expressed, and can be developed by staying a soldier, as happened to Salter; or perhaps it wakes resistance which reveals what I need to do instead, as happened to O’Brien.

What being a soldier wakes in Salter is a certain kind of Romanticism: a need to be the passionate and doomed hero, without which his life wouldn’t have been a success for him, but which he’s self-aware enough about to satirize. He tells a story against himself of giving some disastrously terrible advice to a classmate out of that Romanticism, for example. This particular self-realization is the good for Salter, but not necessarily for anyone else, and is in tension—as elements of anyone’s good can be—with other equally real goods for Salter.

I have explored three possible relations between roles and the good: they are tools for self-shaping towards an independent good understood as desire-fulfilment; or they are parts of good-making practices which transform individuals by creating goods and initiating those individuals into them; or they are methods for self-discovery which begin and direct the achievement of good understood as self-realization.

The point of that exploration was to show the importance of my relation 3 for our understanding of roles in human life, by showing that regular ascetic transformative roles like *soldier* are *methods of self-discovery* in some real cases; that this reveals the self as *unchosen*, *seedlike*,and *initially opaque to itself*; and that this is reason to think that *the good is self-realization* (not just desire-fulfilment, and not just created by institutions). The point was further to offer a substantive picture of practical rationality, opposed to purely formal accounts, on which it is intrinsically rational to pursue self-knowledge and self-realization.

**References**

Bruner, Jerome. 2004. ‘Life as Narrative’. *Social Research* 71: 691–710.

Cassam, Quassim. 2014. *Self-Knowledge for Humans.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clark, Samuel. 2010. ‘Love, Poetry, and the Good Life: Mill’s *Autobiography* and Perfectionist Ethics’. *Inquiry* 53: 565–578.

Clark, Samuel. 2012. ‘Pleasure as Self-Discovery’. *Ratio* 25: 260–276.

Clark, Samuel. 2013. ‘Under the Mountain: Basic Training, Individuality, and Comradeship’. *Res Publica* 19: 67–79.

Clark, Samuel. 2017. ‘Good Work’. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34: 61–73.

Clark, Samuel. 2021. *Good Lives: Autobiography, Self-Knowledge, Narrative, and Self-Realization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Douglass, Frederick. 1986. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*. Houston A. Baker Jr. (ed.), London: Penguin, 1986.

Freeman, Mark. 1993. *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*. London: Routledge.

Gosse, Edmund. 1983. *Father and Son*. Peter Abbs (ed.), London: Penguin.

Hardimon, Michael O. 1994. ‘Role Obligations’. *Journal of Philosophy* 91: 333–363.

Hume, David. 1969 [1739]. *A Treatise of Human Nature.* Ernest C. Mossner (ed.), Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Lessing, Doris. 1995. *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949*. London: Flamingo.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2007. *After Virtue: An Essay in Moral Theory* (3rd edn.). London: Bloomsbury.

O’Brien, Tim. 2003. *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. London: Flamingo.

Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Paul, Laurie A. 2014. *Transformative Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rousseau, Philip. 1999. *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Salter, James. 2014. *Burning the Days: Recollection*. London: Picador.

Sassoon, Siegfried. 1937. *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*. London: Faber and Faber.

Schechtman, Marya. 1996. *The Constitution of Selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Steele, Katie and H. Orri Stefánsson. 2020. ‘Decision Theory’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/decision-theory/>>.

Strawson, Galen. 2009. *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sumner, L. W. 1996. *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, Bernard. 2005. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (with a commentary on the text by A. W. Moore). London: Routledge.

1. A branch of the Cyclists’ Touring Club, a national charitable organization with 68,000 members, founded in 1878, which aims to promote and support cycling and cyclists. I give this detail just to show that the CTC is definitely an institution which supports roles. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This account clearly owes a great deal to Alasdair MacIntyre (especially 2007), but I do not intend to be doing any interpretation of MacIntyre or attributing any views to him here. I am just borrowing some ideas for my own purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)