

The best you can

10 NOVEMBER 2015

In fiction, protagonists narrow their focus until the difference between success and failure on their specific task seems like the difference between victory and defeat. Batman attempts to solve the mystery while ensuring that nobody dies; meanwhile, children in Africa suffer from Malaria. The crew in The Martian spends billions of dollars worth of capital to save one man; capital that could have been spent curing diseases.

Real people run a risk of duplicating this error, if they try to find the very best action available.

It's easy to paralyze yourself if you try to do the "right thing." There's always more uncertainty to be had. There's always more information you could gather. It's hard to become confident that you're doing the right thing. This can lead to paralysis, and persistent inaction.

It's much easier, I think, to stop asking "is this action the right action to take?" and instead ask "what's the best action I can identify at the moment?"

Sometimes, the best action you can identify is "search for more alternatives." Sometimes, it's "study more" or "learn

more." Sometimes, it's a specific action. The nice thing is that "what's the best action I can find in the next five minutes?" always has a concrete answer. If you search for that, instead, you won't get paralyzed.

Spoiler alert: you can't find the "actually best" action. Insofar as there *is* an "actually best" sequence of motor outputs your brain could produce, it's a mad convoluted dance that leverages butterfly effects to reforge the world overnight. You're not going to find the "best action." And the best action you *can* find is exactly what it sounds like — the best action you're able to find.

You never have enough information to make a fully informed choice. You never have enough time to consider all the possibilities, or weigh all the evidence. You are always biased; your brain is compromised. The problem before you is too hard, and no matter what you do, a billion more people are going to die.

No matter what gambles you take, no matter how risky or cautious you are, you're trading off some possible futures against other ones. You can't save them all.

All you can do is look at your actions, and take the best one you can find.

It's easy for humans to zoom in to the game we think we're playing, and try to win *completely*, to solve the mystery without letting *anyone* die.

It's easier to remember to pick the best action you can find, rather than striving to do the "right thing," if you remember that people have already died; that the threshold has already been crossed. That we're not playing for a "total victory" any more, that we've already missed our chance at a "perfect score."

This is a battle we've already lost.

A hundred billion people have already died.

Rome fell. The barbarian hordes flooded through its gates. There were a thousand years of darkness.

We've already missed our shot at a total victory. Now we're just building the best future we can.

So don't get paralyzed looking for the right thing to do. Just find the best action you *can* find, and do that.