

MAKING HARD CHOICES

NewPhilosopher



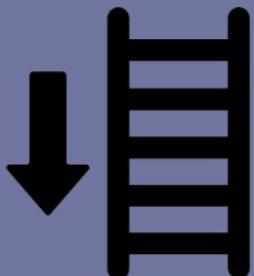
BARRY SCHWARTZ
The paradox of choice

PATRICK STOKES
Damned if you don't

NIGEL WARBURTON
Impossible choices

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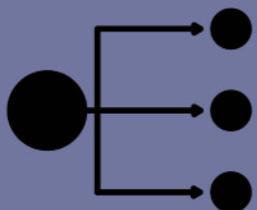
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"Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof."

—John Kenneth Galbraith

Choice

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argued that life is a series of choices. Our choices, which he claimed are ours alone to make, define us and bring meaning to our lives. Each action that we take is a choice of sorts, a choice that is solely our responsibility to make — and this responsibility, given its importance in determining the course of our lives, can overwhelm us with dread and anxiety.

His fellow Existentialists, those who followed in his footsteps, tended to agree, although they seemed to regard the situation as more empowering than anxiety-inducing. A wake-up call of sorts. "Man is nothing other than his own project," wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. "There is no love other than the deeds of love... there is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art." Sartre believed that our only purpose is the one we set ourselves; that we forge our own destiny. To Sartre, reality alone counts; and our choices determine this reality.

One of Sartre's famous choices, which subsequently determined his reality, was to fall out with his former firm friend, the Nobel Prize-winning author Albert Camus. He and Camus fought over various matters, but the turning point came when Sartre argued that the use of violence and terror was a justified means to an end. Camus strongly disagreed.

Sartre spent the next few decades defending his position, or as Galbraith said, "getting busy on the proof" rather than contemplating alternative arguments. We all face choices on a daily basis but as Sartre's situation shows, perhaps the most significant ones are the positions we take on important matters.

Although we might be free to choose, ultimately it's a case of *caveat eligens*: it's not so easy to change one's mind.

Zan Boag
Editor-in-Chief
New Philosopher

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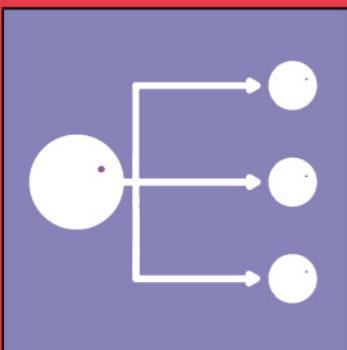
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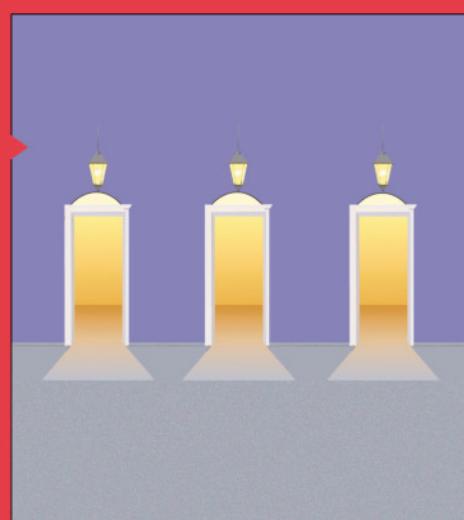


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Nigel Warburton is a freelance philosopher, podcaster, writer, and the Editor-at-large of *New Philosopher*. Described as “one of the most-read popular philosophers of our time”, his books include *A Little History of Philosophy*, *Thinking from A to Z*, and *Philosophy: The Classics*. The interviewer for the Philosophy Bites podcast, Warburton was previously Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Open University and Lecturer in Philosophy at Nottingham University.

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Antonia Case is Editorial Director of *New Philosopher*, was Founding Editor of *Womankind*, and is an award-winning writer and journalist. She is the author of *Flourish*, on personal identity and change, published by Bloomsbury. She was the winner of the 2013 Australasian Association of Philosophy Media Professionals’ Award and in 2016 was shortlisted for Editor of the Year. Case was selected as ‘philosopher in residence’ for the 2016 Brisbane Writers’ Festival.

Marina Benjamin

Marina Benjamin is a writer and editor. As a memoirist, she is best known for *The Middlepause*, which offered a poetic and philosophical take on midlife. Benjamin is also the author of *Insomnia* and her new memoir *A Little Give*. She was arts editor of the *New Statesman* and deputy arts editor at the *London Evening Standard*, and is a senior editor at *Aeon*. Her book *Rocket Dreams* was shortlisted for the Eugene Emme Literature Award.

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Alvaro Hidalgo is a graphic designer and illustrator who formerly worked as an art director in design projects and as a film editor and post-producer in audiovisual projects. His illustration work uses a combination of traditional techniques and digital image processing, and Hidalgo’s award-winning illustrations have graced the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *Womankind*, and have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Wired*, *Newsweek*, and *The Atlantic*.

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Dr Tom Chatfield is a British author and philosopher of technology, with a special interest in critical thinking, AI and ethics. His most recent book, *Wise Animals*, explores the co-evolution of humanity and technology, and what the present might learn from our deep past. His other books exploring digital culture and critical thought are published in over thirty languages.

Russel Herneman

Russel Herneman is an award-winning cartoonist whose work has appeared in *The Times of London*, *Private Eye*, *Prospect*, *The Spectator*, and many others. He was awarded Pocket Cartoon of the Year 2018 in the Political Cartoon Awards, the 2020 European Newspaper Design award for illustration, and the 2021 Society of News Design Award of excellence for Illustration.

André Dao

André Dao André Dao is an author and researcher. His debut novel, *Anam*, won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction, the NSW Premier's Literary Award for New Writing, and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. He is also the co-founder of *Behind the Wire*, an award-winning oral history project documenting the stories of the adults and children who have been detained by the Australian government after seeking asylum in Australia.

Corey Mohler

Corey Mohler is the creator of *Existential Comics*, which has covered more than 120 philosophers, examining a wide variety of thought from pre-Socratic philosophy to contemporary philosophy. In 2018 Mohler drew attention from Elon Musk after calling him "the villain from Atlas Shrugged". Musk angrily responded during a SpaceX launch and Mohler later published a comic about the incident.

Howard Gardner

Howard Gardner is Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He has twice been selected by *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* magazines as one of 100 most influential public intellectuals in the world and received a MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1981. The author of over thirty books translated into thirty-two languages, and several hundred articles, Gardner is best known in educational circles for his theory of multiple intelligences.

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Kelly Truelove advises on technology matters at issue in internet and AI litigation. At TrueSciPhi.org, he publishes projects such as AI dialogues and a podcast directory that are of interest to science and philosophy communities. He holds a Ph.D. in physics from the University of California, Berkeley.

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Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, 1560, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder



Photo: Eugenio Mazzone

The unlived life

Every choice you've made in life has brought you to here, now, reading this article. Every small decision has funnelled you to this point. Had you made a different choice at any point in your life's trajectory, then right now it's likely that you'd be doing something else.

It's not surprising, then, that we spend a great deal of our lives contemplating the paths *not* taken, or the life we're not leading: parallel lives that exist alongside our own, at least in our imagination. For some, these unlived lives may entail risks not taken, or opportunities foregone. Had we been braver, wiser, or perhaps acted with a little more prudence, where would we be now?

In his book, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*, Adam Phillips writes; "There is always what will turn out to be the life we led, and the life that accompanied it: the parallel life (or lives) that never actually happened."

Like a choose-your-own-adventure book, some choices in life turn out to be better than others. It's true that had you made different choices along the way, your life could be vastly superior to the one you're living now. And indeed, it's this unlived life that haunts people; the choice you didn't make that could have set you up for success; the choices that could have opened new vistas or possibilities for insight, love, and

adventure. "Our lives become an elegy to needs unmet and desires sacrificed, to possibilities refused, to roads not taken," writes Phillips.

Most often, we're plagued by what Phillips describes as the "myth of our potential" – the person we could have been had the stars aligned. "We share our lives with the people we have failed to be... The myth of our potential can make of our lives a perpetual falling-short," he notes.

But as Phillips asks, how would we know if we had realised our potential? Where does this 'picture in our heads' even come from? Many sketch an outline of their ideal life during childhood and adolescence ("I want to be millionaire by 30"), and later resent themselves when life choices lead them far from this envisioned path.

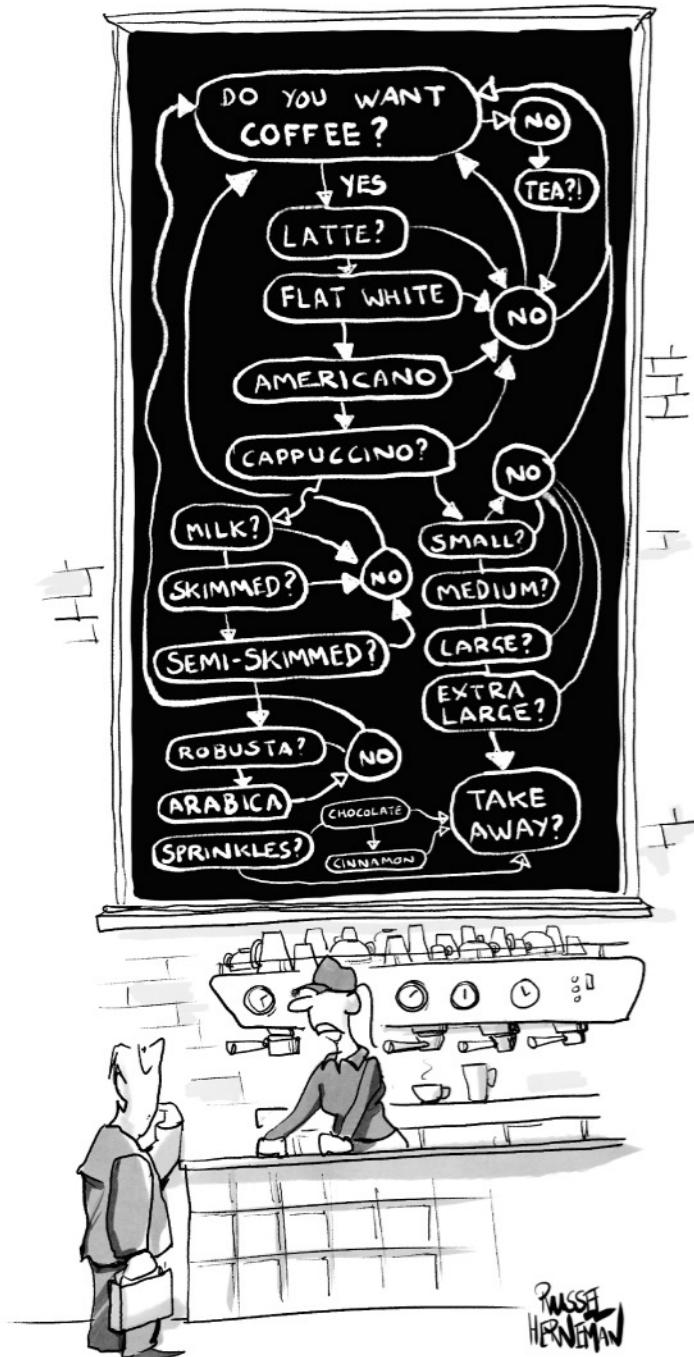
Our lives are informed by the lives or dreams that escape us – the loss of what might have been, of the experiences we never had. However Phillips notes that parallel lives can be insightful for revealing what it is that we feel is missing in our lives. "The frustration is where we start from," he writes. Frustration reveals what it is we might be wanting, or missing; it highlights what will give us pleasure in our life.

It's also worth remembering that no matter which choice you made in the past, even had it been the most optimal

choice you could have made at the time, you would continue to nurse a 'parallel life' which might have been even more fruitful, more exhilarating and successful – and you'd yearn for this wished-for life in place of your own. "Wanting is what we do to survive, and we only want what isn't there," writes Phillips. It is the nature of human psychology to always want something other than what we have, and once we realise this, we can learn to forgive ourselves for missing out on our so-called "unlived life", as Phillips put it. Because our unlived life is nothing other than an illusion. No matter what sort of life we manage to muster, we will yearn for a life that is 'other'. (You excel as a lawyer but can't shake the desire to be a novelist.) To realise this, that the unlived life is an illusion that will tantalise no matter how good you've got it, allows you to turn to the life you do have and take note that it is the only one that matters.

"Imagine a captain of a ship the moment a shift of direction must be made; then he may be able to say: I can do either this or that. But if he is not a mediocre captain he will also be aware that during all this the ship is ploughing ahead with its ordinary velocity, and thus there is but a single moment when it is inconsequential whether he does this or does that. So also with a person – if he forgets to take into account the velocity – there eventually comes a moment where it is no longer a matter of an Either/Or, not because he has chosen, but because he has refrained from it, which also can be expressed by saying: Because others have chosen for him – or because he has lost himself."

– Søren Kierkegaard



We are our choices

When Jean-Paul Sartre wrote “man is condemned to be free” in *Existentialism is a Humanism* in 1946, he argued that at every instance we invent ourselves by dint of the choices we make. Every action we take contributes to our shaping. We are not defined by what we think, dream, or hope. We are only defined by what we do. Existentialism is a doctrine of action. “There is no reality except in action,” he writes.

In Sartre’s time, however, people were not condemned to the internet, that black hole of infinite choices. Back in 1946, the average person didn’t get seduced by the life of the travel blogger on social media, the startup founder, family influencer, chateau owner, wine sommelier, personal trainer, and so forth. Instead, back in Sartre’s time, choice was largely restricted to what happened to (literally) ‘cross your path’.

In 2000, psychologists Sheena Iyengar from Columbia and Mark Lepper from Stanford published a study called, “When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?” The psychologists set up tasting booths in an upscale grocery store that displayed either a limited (6) or an extensive (24) selection of different flavours of jam. Customers were allowed to taste as many jams as they desired, and afterwards, if they wished, they could purchase the jam at the checkout.

The psychologists discovered that more choice did not lead to more tasting (consumers from both booths tasted between 1 and 2 jams on average); but more telling was the discovery that 30 per cent of consumers in the limited-choice condition subsequently purchased a jam compared to only 3 per cent of consumers in the extensive-choice condition. “Having ‘too much’ choice seems nonetheless to have hampered their later motivation to buy,” the researchers concluded. “As the attractiveness of alternatives rises, individuals experience conflict and as a result tend to defer decisions, search for new alternatives, choose the default option, or simply opt not to choose.” It seems that having a rich diversity of options doesn’t help people form better decisions. In fact, it paralyses them. One peruses the options but can’t commit to taking action.

If we define our essence through our choices and actions, as the existentialists propose, what happens when our choices and actions are impaired by choice overload, or the gluttony of information on the internet? If we find ourselves failing to choose or act, our essence – the person we are creating through our choices – remains unformed, or fragmented as we scroll from one interest to the next. Without deliberate action, Sartre warns, we risk falling into inauthenticity: living according to others’ expectations rather than our own choices, or passively adopting external influences.

Young Man at His Window, 1876, by Gustave Caillebotte





Artwork: Simone de Beauvoir, by Charis Tsevis

"Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness within the immense collectivity, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness, a finiteness which is open on the infinite. And in fact, any man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires, and real will knows quite well that he has no need of any outside guarantee to be sure of his goals; their certitude comes from his own drive.

There is a very old saying which goes: 'Do what you must, come what may.'

- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*



Illustration by Frankie S.

Condemned to be free

After graduating from the École normale supérieure in Paris, Jean-Paul Sartre declared that he was hatching some new “destructive philosophy”, but he was unsure as to what form it would take. Underwhelmed by what he had studied at university, Sartre shifted his attention to Berlin, where he delved into Edmund Husserl’s ideas on pure phenomenology, Martin Heidegger’s exploration of human freedom, as well as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, all of which he later synthesized into his own brand of philosophy, pioneered in his book *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre wanted a real philosophy that could be applied to people’s lives. And his big topic was human freedom, which distinguishes humans from all other things. Humans possess the unique capacity to transcend the constraints of biology and their environment, and can, more or less,

make it up as they go along. “Man is condemned to be free because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does,” he writes in *Being and Nothingness*. Our destiny, or fate, is not set out for us; but rather, at every moment, we choose our own path and in doing so, we create our purpose. We are our own project.

“My life and my philosophy are one and the same,” Sartre wrote in his diary. Rather than taking up a university post and having his freedom curtailed by the constraints of academia, Sartre taught philosophy at high schools for some years and freelanced. It seems he was more committed to his daily excursions to Café Flore and Les Deux Magots with Simone de Beauvoir, with whom he maintained an open relationship for half a century. There, they’d write and share ideas on their version of what it means to be free.

Newcomb's paradox

When William Newcomb penned his paradox in the 1960s, something he didn't even publish as it didn't cross his mind to do so, he wasn't to know that it would become one of the most famous philosophical puzzles, or paradoxes. And even though hundreds of papers have been written on 'Newcomb's paradox', it is still far from resolved.

The paradox is relatively straightforward – that is, until you start to think about it in more depth.

Two closed boxes, A and B, are on a table in front of you. Box A is transparent and contains \$1,000, which you can plainly see. Box B is opaque, so you don't know what's inside. Box B contains either nothing, or \$1 million.

This test is set by a super-intelligent 'Predictor', who has already made a prediction about what you will do. If it predicted that you would take both boxes, it will leave box B empty. If it predicted that you would take box B only, it will put a \$1 million in it.

You have two options:

1. Take both boxes
2. Take box B only

You discover that the Predictor is remarkably accurate in forecasting movements of other players, and that

there's a high likelihood that they've already predicted what you will do. The Predictor makes its move, and now it's your turn. What do you do? Take both boxes, or box B only?

Interestingly, in a 2020 PhilPapers survey of 1,785 English-speaking philosophers from around the world, 31 per cent of philosophers chose to take box B only, and 39 per cent chose to take both boxes (other philosophers were either undecided or accepted a combination of views).

Having studied economics for four years at university, it doesn't surprise me that, when faced with the paradox, I instantly sought to maximise my utility. I wanted the \$1 million and, presuming that the Predictor would know this in advance, I chose to take box B only. I didn't want to jeopardise the \$1 million by choosing both boxes and being left with a measly \$1,000.

But other philosophers have a different take on it. The Predictor has already played its move (it placed the money in box B or not before you made your choice). And so, whatever you do now will not affect the amount of money in box B. So, by taking both boxes, you stand to receive \$1,000 more. One could well argue, therefore, that I am maximising my utility by taking both boxes, because I will be \$1,000 better off.

The paradox was first unearthed by Robert Nozick, who published it in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. For philosophers, it is particularly intriguing as it grapples with the question of making a choice (exercising our free will) in the knowledge that a Predictor already knows the choice we will make (the choice is already determined). In the paradox, the Predictor represents a universe where choices are not freely made but are instead part of a predictable, cause-and-effect chain, which reflects the philosophical tension between determinism and free will. Are our decisions in life genuinely independent or do they simply follow a path that could be foreseen by a sufficiently advanced intelligence?

Sometimes, when faced with a choice, we experience this unspoken sense that we already know what choice we will make. We're someone who always chooses the least (or most) risky option, or we hedge our bets, or fail to make a choice at all (which is, mind you, still a choice). When faced with big life choices, we tend to act in a fairly predictable manner – a way that a Predictor could forecast fairly accurately.

One could argue, then, whether we are truly making a choice at all – what feels like choice may instead be the unfolding of a predetermined path.

“And we feel that the hero has lived all the details of this night like annunciations, promises, or even that he lived only those that were promises, blind and deaf to all that did not herald adventure. We forget that the future was not yet there; the man was walking in the night without forethought, a night which offered him a choice of dull rich prizes, and he did not make his choice.”

– Jean-Paul Sartre



CAREER CHOICE



When Socrates questioned, “What kind of life should I live?” he could well have framed it as, “What sort of career should I choose?” – because the choice of career is one of the major life decisions a person can make. It’s no surprise, therefore, that teenagers, standing at the precipice of making this life-shaping decision, suffer considerably.

“We must... fill out our span of life with activities,” wrote Kant in *Lectures on Ethics*. The question becomes, therefore, which activities should these be?

In his paper ‘Career Choice’, philosophy professor Norman S. Care defines a career as “a long-term project for an individual life”. He writes that a career “typically involves work and way of life such that the former has implications for the makeup of the latter”. In other words, our choice of career will consume a substantial portion of our time and energy; it will determine what we think about, how we use our bodies, where we are

located during the day or night, the people we spend time with. There is a moral dimension, too, to the choice of a career. Do I choose a career for self-realisation (to realise my artistic and intellectual talents), or a career that’s in service to others?

How well a person is remunerated for their work, too, influences quality of life – in that lower-paying jobs offer fewer ‘tickets’ in the material world. “A person may or may not ‘make money’ or ‘earn a living’ from a career, but a person who has a career may very well seem internally related to the work and way of life so that they become a part of his personal identity for practical purposes,” writes Care. “A large psychological investment may be involved. One’s thoughts, hopes, aspirations, energy, and sense of worth may be wrapped up in and dominated by the materials and apparatus of one’s career... One may be, in important part, one’s career.”

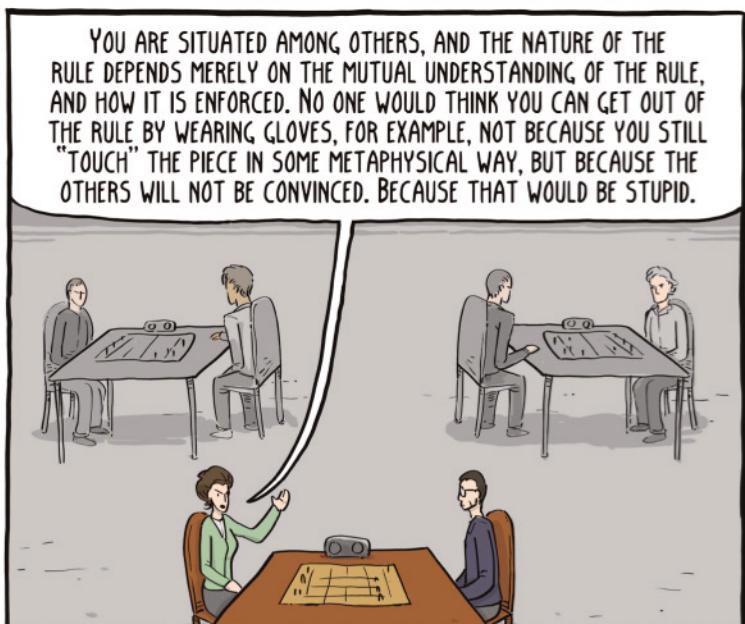
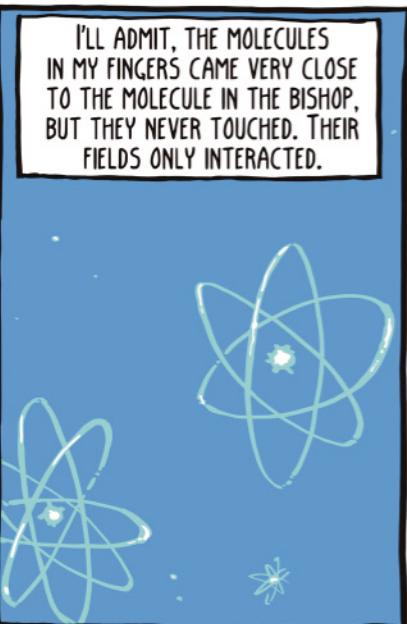
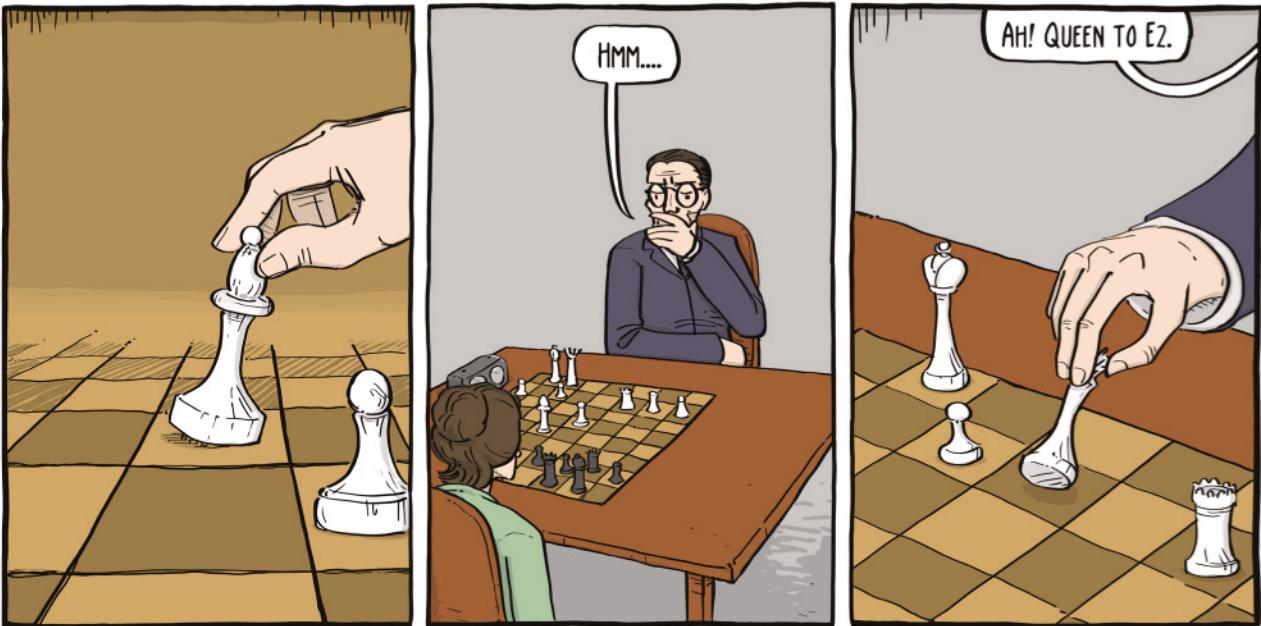


Photo: Marcus Urbenz

“Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity.”

Hannah Arendt

Existential Chess





by Patrick Stokes

Damned if you don't

There is an infamous passage in the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's book *Either/Or* that declares:

Marry, and you will regret it; don't marry, you will also regret it; marry or don't marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the world's foolishness, you will regret it; weep over it, you will also regret it; laugh at the world's foolishness or weep over it, you will regret it either way. Believe a girl, you will regret it; don't believe her, you will also regret it; believe her or don't you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it; hang yourself or don't hang yourself, you'll regret it either way. This, gentlemen, is the essence of all life-wisdom.

That's a lot of words just to say "damned if you do, damned if you don't" (and, for the record, I've actually taken a few redundant sentences out of the quote), but it's also an

unattractively bleak assessment of life: whatever you choose, you'll regret it, up to and including suicide. Thankfully, it's not actually Kierkegaard's own view of things. Kierkegaard, rather unusually for a philosopher, wrote much of his most important work in the voice of a range of characters, each with their own competing worldview, rather than his own authorial voice.

These particular words about the futility of choice are attributed to a young man known only as 'A', who lives in what Kierkegaard calls the "aesthetic" sphere of existence. In this mode of life, we simply go wherever our inclinations take us, pursuing pleasure (whether base or refined, physical or intellectual) from one moment to the next.

The aesthetic life, as Kierkegaard quickly shows in the book, is ultimately self-defeating. No matter how hard you chase pleasure, boredom and meaninglessness will always get you in the end.

Thankfully, as A's older friend, Judge William, points out, life doesn't have to be that way. The choice to get married, for instance, certainly can be a fulfilling one. It just takes commitment, choosing marriage through bad times as well as good. It's through such choices, according to William, that we become integrated, stable personalities across time, rather than just being a bundle of whims. Judge William points out that, insofar as A just follows his impulses, he doesn't really choose things at all, any more than a feather caught in the wind chooses to float left or right.

But perhaps we're dismissing A's view of choice too quickly here. The young aesthete is arguably right, in ways he himself does not quite understand. It's not necessarily that any choice we make will turn out to be disappointing, as he seems to think. Rather, it's that any choice we make demands that we give up other things that might well have been worth pursuing – otherwise it



The Proposal, 1872, William Bouguereau

wouldn't really be a choice at all. Every time we choose to go one way rather than another, we're not just making a positive commitment to one option. We're also rejecting a vast, perhaps near-infinite number of other possibilities.

Say you decide to go to law school. You're not just choosing a profession, you're choosing not to pursue any number of other careers. You were probably never really going to be an astronaut or a rock star – though who knows? – but there's no end of other jobs you might have chosen instead. You might tell yourself there will be time later to change course, but even choosing to do things later in life, rather than earlier, has consequences for what will and won't be possible.

Nor can you ever really be entirely sure of just what you're saying 'no' to. Marry, and you're not just marrying one person. You're also "forsaking all others", as the traditional vows have it, without any possibility of knowing who the vast majority of others you're forsaking are. That's an awful lot of people you just forsook; just how sure are you that none of them were worth another glance?

Not all choices are this momentous, of course, but even the most trivial ones come with abandoned possibilities. Cereal for breakfast? That's a piece of toast foregone. Taking the dog to the park for a walk? Think of all the other parks you could have visited, or all the other dogs you could have walked. Watching the latest superhero blockbuster this evening? An evening you can't get back for any other purpose, even if you really liked the movie.

This all sounds frivolous, but there's an ethical dimension to such choices too. As Jacques Derrida said, when I feed my cat, I'm failing to feed every other hungry cat in the world. More significantly, as utilitarians have pointed out, every dollar you spend on entertainment could be spent on alleviating

poverty or sickness somewhere else in the world instead.

Perhaps what's astonishing is not that we feel regret over some of our choices, but that we're not constantly weighed down by regret for all of them, or paralysed with indecision and FOMO: 'Fear Of Missing Out'. It seems like we're constantly slamming the door on uncountably many more options than we select. Perhaps the wisdom of A's "you'll regret it either way" is not that all our options are bad, but that we'll regret all the things we give up every time we choose. How can we reconcile ourselves to a world that's constantly making us pass up almost everything?

Here's one possible consolation – and it's one that by historical accident was not available to the young aesthete, or to Kierkegaard himself.

We can think of making a choice as evaluating a range of possible worlds. Trying to decide whether to have cereal or toast this morning? You're choosing between the nearest possible world in which you eat toast and the nearest possible world in which you eat cereal, and determining which world is better. ('Nearest possible' just means a world that's as close to the world as it is now, only changing your choice of breakfast plus whatever flows from that one change). When you opt for toast, you actualise the toast-world instead of the cereal-world, or other worlds in which you eat pancakes, eggs, spaghetti, gravel...

But if you choose the toast-world, what happens to the cereal-world? Here's where it gets weird.

'Modal realism', as championed by the twentieth century American philosopher David Lewis, infamously argues that all possible universes are equally real. The world in which you eat toast is the actual world, but that's no more significant than saying that you ate breakfast here rather than over

Marry, and you're not just marrying one person. You're also 'forsaking all others,' as the traditional vows have it.

there. Just as other places besides 'here' still exist, Lewis argued that other possible worlds are just as real as the actual world. The cereal-world may not be actual, but it's as real a world as any other. There are unimaginably many possible worlds, and some of them are horrible (including worlds where life never evolved on Earth). But they're no less real than our own.

Needless to say, modal realism was, and still is, hugely controversial. Many reject it, arguing that possible worlds are mere ideas rather than real places. But for those who accept the theory, there's a rather comforting result: all those options you had to give up when you made a choice are not simply lost. Rather, we can think of an infinite range of universes beside the actual one, worlds in which you took all those other forks in the road. So, in that sense at least, none of your possibilities are ever really lost. They're just elsewhere.

We can never, of course, know what our lives would have been like had we pursued those other choices, so it can be hard to know what to regret. But if Lewis is right, there is always some universe out there where you made a different choice. And in at least one of them, you're a rock star. □

STEP 1: THE CRIME

Two financial officers at a company have been secretly misreporting their returns for several years. They have been embezzling the excess returns into an offshore account to which only the two of them have access. They are able to keep the scam hidden for a few years until the company is audited.

STEP 2: THE BUST

Investigators notice something suspicious in both of their financial records, but do not have enough evidence to indict either suspect without a confession from at least one of them. They are both brought in for questioning and given the same offer... Keep quiet, or implicate the other suspect and be released without charges as a state's witness... unless the other accomplice has also confessed, in which case they both serve reduced sentences.

Source: Evolutionary Games

STEP 3: THE DILEMMA

They face a dilemma because each person's fate depends on not just his personal decision, but also the other suspect's decision.

STEP 4: THE CHOICE

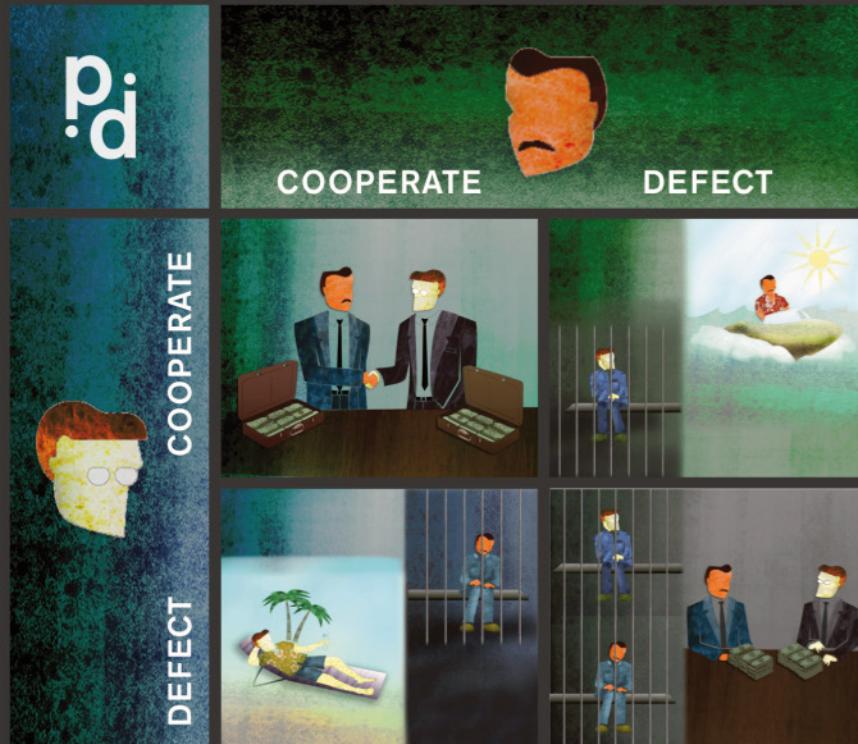
You are one of the embezzlers and you know you can give your partner up but still keep the account secret. What are you going to do? Keep quiet or confess?

1. You both stay quiet. Neither of you serve time and you will split the money.

2. You indict your partner and he stays quiet. He serves the full sentence and you help yourself to all of the money.

3. You stay quiet but your partner indicts you. You will serve the full sentence while he goes free and enjoys all the money in the secret account.

4. You indict each other. You will both serve time, but not a full sentence since you aided the authorities. You will both split the money from the secret account when you get out, but trust is gone.



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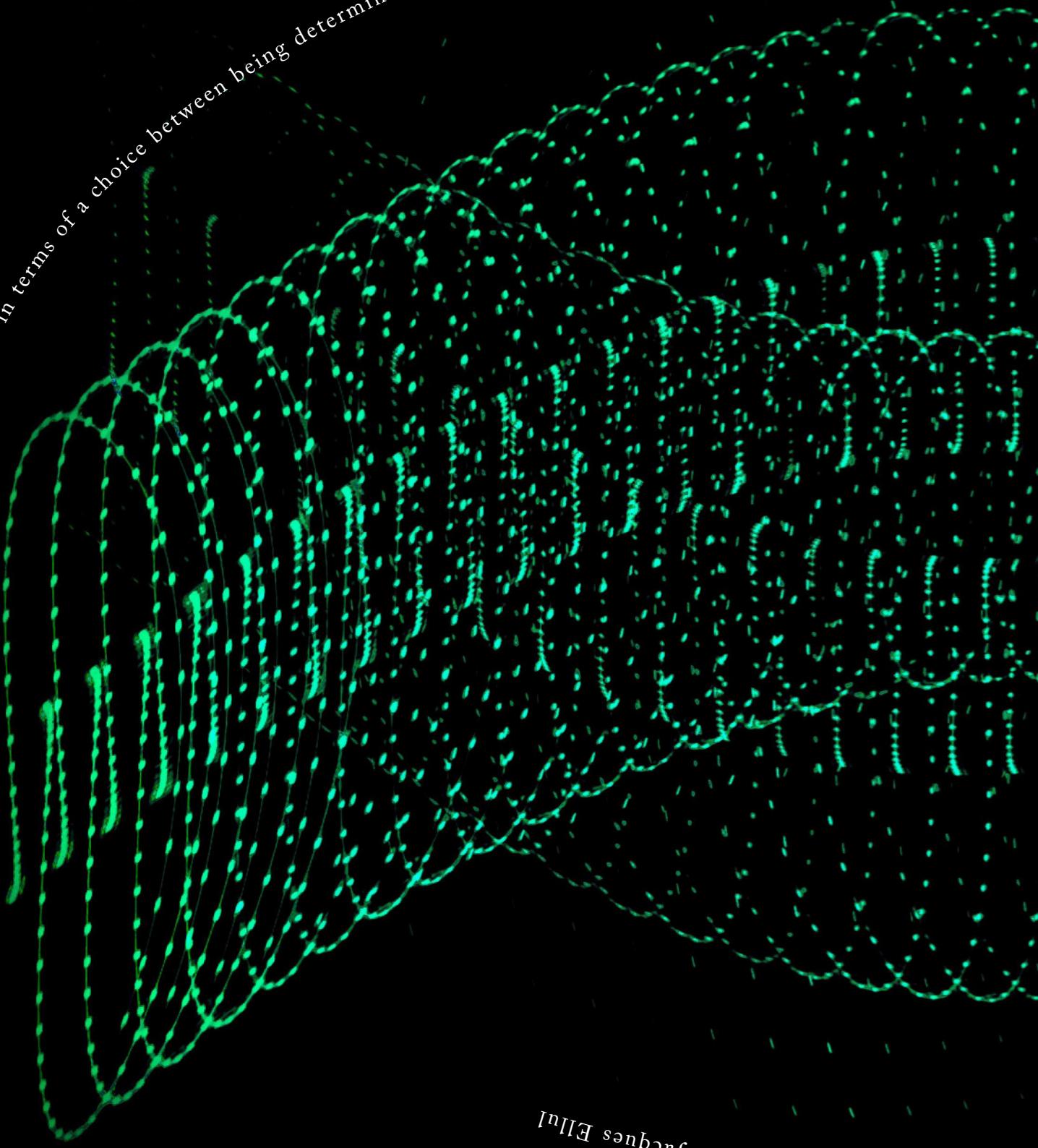


BARRY SCHWARTZ
The paradox of choice

PATRICK STOKES
Damned if you don't

NIGEL WARBURTON
Impossible choices

“We must not think of the problem in terms of a choice between being determined and being free. We must look at it dialectically, and continually to be won.” — Jacques Ellul



him to overcome necessity, and

say that man is indeed determined, but that it is open to
this act is freedom. Freedom is not static but dynamic; not a vested interest, but a prize



The perils of overthinking

By Antonia Case

When leading golfer Scottie Scheffler was asked what he thought about while playing golf, he revealed that he didn't really think about much at all. "I try to stick to my process and... not overthink things," Scheffler said. In fact, the world's number one golfer would often blame a poor golf performance on the curse of "overthinking".

Scheffler's 'unthinking' golf style concurs with studies conducted by cognitive scientist Sian Beilock at her human performance laboratory at the University of Chicago. Beilock found that golfers who putted while focusing on the logo on the golf ball often performed better than those who ensured their knees were slightly bent, weight slightly more on the front foot, and putter face square to

the target line. While she admits it's helpful to have a routine, she adds: "putting as quickly as is reasonable is a good idea".

Logic and rational thinking have dominated philosophy of mind for centuries. We are thinking beings, and the best choices are made when we put our rational, analytical minds to the task, or so the theory goes. When making a choice, we've been taught to analyse the available information and weigh up the pros and cons – even jotting them down into opposite columns on a sheet of paper and weighing them up against each other. Do the pros outweigh the cons, or vice versa?

Some people tackle life's biggest decisions this way: What course should I study? What career should I

pursue? Or what home should I buy? They set their minds to the task of analysing, assessing, and reflecting on the choices at hand, and then somehow come to a decision that ticks more of the boxes. Gut feeling or instinct are deemed too unreliable and fickle for important life decisions, so any sort of 'inner voice' nudging them in any one direction is ignored in favour of deliberate reasoning.

But is this the best way to make decisions?

In his book, *Gut Feelings: Short Cuts to Better Decision Making*, Gerd Gigerenzer argues that, just like professional golfers trying to sink a 10-foot putt, we're often best served to get out of our heads. In other words, overthinking things can cause us to make worse decisions. He writes:

“Important decisions – whom to marry, which job to accept, what to do with the rest of your life – are not only a matter of our imagined pros and cons. Something else weighs in the decision process, something quite literally heavy: our evolved brain.” Gigerenzer uses the word gut feeling, but he also refers to it as intuition, or hunch. This ‘feeling in your bones’, if you will, appears quickly in consciousness and is strong enough to act upon. But the underlying reasons for the ‘gut feeling’ are not fully known to us. We just get this sense that this is the right course of action to take.

Gigerenzer mentions a study conducted by social psychologist Timothy Wilson, which shows the perils of analysing things too much. Two groups of women were given a ‘thank you’ poster for participating in an experiment. The first group of women were simply allowed to pick their favourite poster out of a selection of five. The second group of women, however, had to describe their reasons for liking or disliking each poster before choosing one. “Interestingly,” added Gigerenzer, “the two groups tended to take different posters home.” Four weeks later, the women were asked how much they enjoyed their posters, and Wilson found that those who had given reasons for their choice were “less satisfied and regretted their choice” more than those who had not given any reasons. “Deliberate thinking about reasons seems to lead to decisions that make us less happy,” Gigerenzer writes.

When riding a bike, for example, we do not think about the mental and bodily processes involved in the activity; the vestibular system (located in the inner ear) helps us

maintain balance; our cardiovascular and respiratory system adjusts our breathing and heart rate to match the physical effort required to ride a bike; our reflexes are tuned in to brake quickly; our eyes track the road, and our legs follow a repetitive motion to maintain speed. All of these processes are happening behind the scenes, but it is not for us to analyse them. Instead, we just hop on a bike and happily peddle down the street, confident that these processes are happening below the level of conscious awareness.

When facing decisions in life, however, we do not take the same leap of faith as we do when riding a bike. We don’t just assume that, behind the scenes, our minds will have already assessed the situation and gauged the best course of action to take. Our basal ganglia will scan past experiences to identify similarities to the current situation and our anterior cingulate cortex will detect conflicts between competing options to prioritise one over the other. All the while, our prefrontal cortex will evaluate how decisions align with social norms and expectations – it will retrieve relevant memories to inform decision making (past failures or successes shape our preferences without us realising it), and it will set subconscious goals based on long-term objectives (steering decision-making without explicit awareness). When we’re facing momentous life decisions, we can be fairly certain that our brain is working overtime on it.

In the golf documentary *Full Swing*, four-time major champion Brooks Koepka laments his recent crisis of confidence on the golf course, which he partly puts down to not being able to “turn off”; in other words, thinking too

Our basal ganglia will scan past experiences to identify similarities to the current situation; our anterior cingulate cortex will detect conflicts between competing options to prioritise one over the other.

much about what's going wrong with his game and his golf swing. He compares his performance to Scottie Scheffler, who seems to be on a continual winning streak. "I guarantee if you ask him [Scottie Scheffler] what he's thinking about, he goes 'nothing,'" Koepka laments. "The best player in the world doesn't have any damn thoughts in his head, so why would you? So if Scottie isn't doing it, why the hell am I doing it?"

In her book, *Choke*, cognitive scientist Sian Beilock outlines some of the discoveries made in Chicago, where she convinced her adviser to set up a putting green in his laboratory. In particular, she was interested in the mental processes that cause golfers to miss easy putts. "Choking can occur when people think too much about activities that are usually automatic," she concludes. "This is called 'paralysis by analysis'."

Interestingly, how many of us have experienced that sense of weighty stasis from thinking too much about a decision? Which car, house, job, should I choose? Perhaps, instead, we should take a step back and let the subconscious work behind the scenes. Toss a coin in the air with the options as either heads or tails, and before it lands gauge how you feel about either result. If you're secretly championing for heads to land, then that's probably your preferred choice. ■

"The best player in the world doesn't have any damn thoughts in his head, so why would you? So if Scottie isn't doing it why the hell am I doing it?"



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Flourishing enough

I recently visited Japan for the first time. When I got back, and people asked me what I had found most interesting or surprising, I found myself talking about small things...



The self that is not a self

Existence is suffering. We don't have to look far to see the truth of this dictum: there's the news, of course, which is more often than not a litany of tragedies and atrocities...

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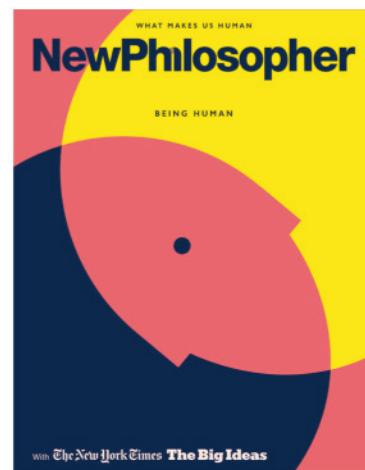
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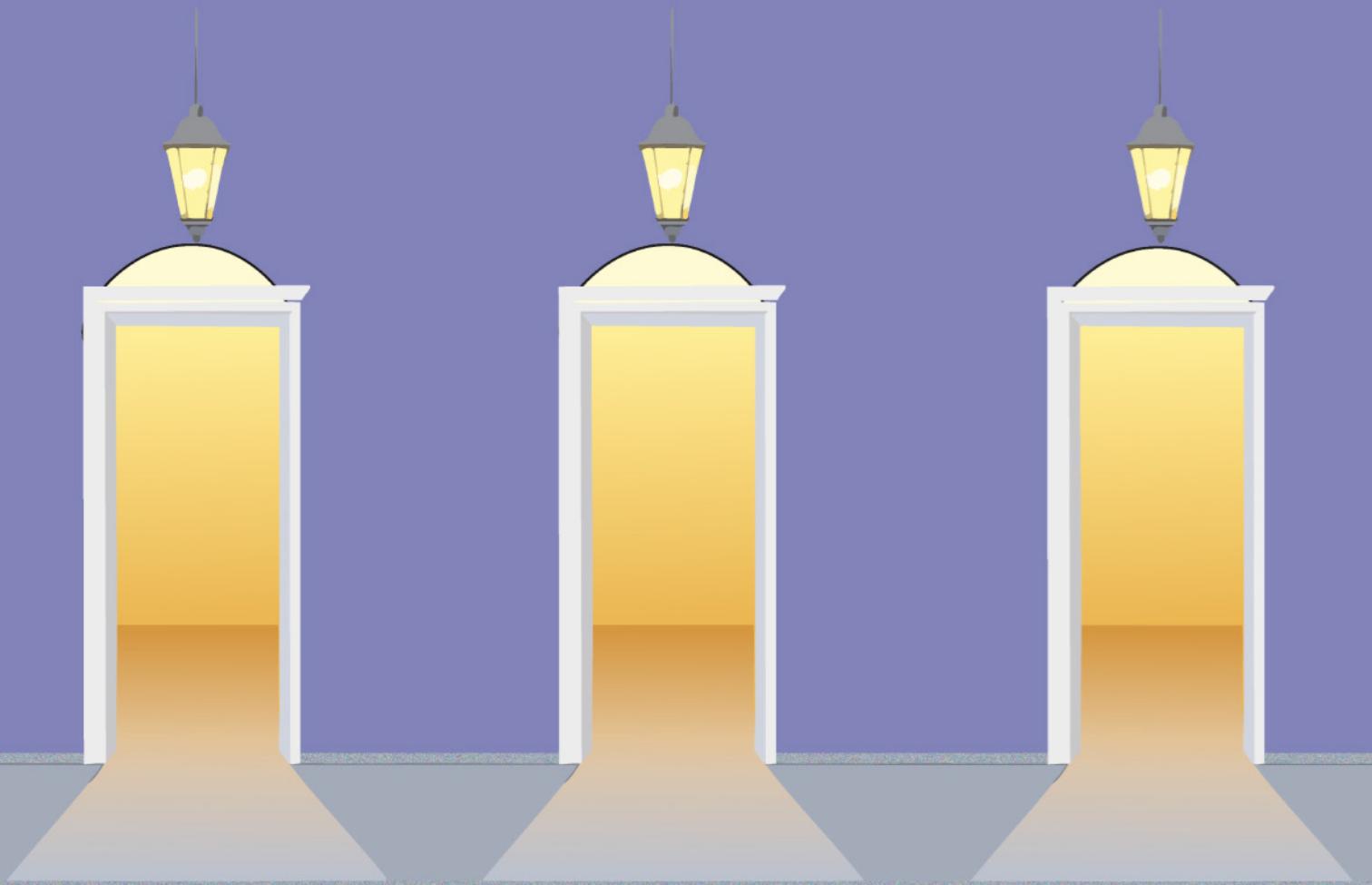
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by Nigel Warburton

Impossible choices

There is a famous paradox, the paradox of Buridan's Ass, named after the 14th century French philosopher Jean Buridan. Imagine an ass which is extremely hungry. It is exactly equidistant from two bales of hay (in some versions it's a bale of hay and a pail of water and the ass is equally hungry and thirsty). On some views of what motivates action there would be nothing to make that animal head one way or the other, it would be caught in a

deadlock, and so it would stay where it was and would just waste away until it died, starved by its indecision even though there was food within easy reach. Without there being anything in favour of one option over the other, deciding which way to go would be impossible. Yet who thinks that's what the animal would actually do? Surely it would just choose one bale at random, it wouldn't matter which one, and head for that. A human being would be even

less likely to starve. If it doesn't make any difference which choice I make, I can decide to go for the one on the left or the one on the right on a whim.

Determinists about free will would have a hard time explaining how I could make that kind of choice. And that is essentially what the paradox was meant to demonstrate. If you believe in determinism and there really is precisely as much motivation to head in either direction, I'd be frozen

in between the two, incapable of any action. Determinists don't believe we really make choices for ourselves, even when we seem to, so this wouldn't exactly be an impossible choice, but it would be an impossible situation.

But even at a less philosophically informed level, when there really is nothing to choose between two or more options, it can take a long time to decide which of the two or more options to select. In a supermarket when there are three different types of coffee available, all about the same price, all looking to be of very similar quality, then it's easy to waste a lot of time trying to decide which one to buy. In the 1960s, the philosopher Herbert Marcuse pointed out that many of the apparent freedoms of the west are illusory because they are of this superficial consumerist kind.

Most significant choices between two courses of action that we encounter in life, however, are not much like selecting which brand of coffee to buy. There is a fork in the road and we have to take one or other of the routes ahead, usually with incomplete information about likely outcomes. Sometimes neither path is attractive, but we rank them and go for the one

that's likely to turn out best. We usually, and quite quickly, find more to be said in favour of one than the other. And if there really is no difference, we might in the end toss a coin to decide which way to go, leaving the choice to chance.

Yet there can be choices which leave no reasonable way out and which can't be avoided. In William Styron's novel and the film based on it, *Sophie's Choice*, Sophie arrives in Auschwitz with her two young children. She declines the advances of a Nazi officer, and perhaps in revenge and to show his power over her, he tells her that only one of her two children can be saved, and she has to choose which one. Sophie pleads, "Don't make me choose. I can't choose." His response is to order a junior Nazi to take both children away. Rather than that, she tells him in desperation, "Take my little girl!" Her young daughter is dragged away screaming and presumably dies in the gas chambers; the boy is sent to the children's section of the camp, with a chance of survival.

She has been forced to make an impossible choice. She could have chosen differently. She could have let both children die or have chosen the

boy to be taken away. So she has a choice, albeit a terrible one. But it really is an impossible one in the sense that it is impossible to come out well from it, and, in the end, whatever she chooses to do she can't take consolation in having done the right thing – as there is no right thing to do. If she decides to save one child rather than lose both, then she is like Buridan's ass, paralysed between the two options, but nevertheless she has to act swiftly to stop both being carried away. The need to make the decision in that instant makes it to some extent arbitrary, as if she had tossed a coin and the girl lost. But part of the cruelty of the Nazi setting her this terrible dilemma is that in that moment she perhaps reveals a preference for the boy over the girl.

'Sophie's Choice' has become a synonym for terrible choices that are forced upon people. But it is only almost impossible, not actually impossible to make such a choice. In Sophie's case, the boy's chances of survival were probably better than the girl's, so perhaps that was the rational decision to make if you believe that it is better to save one child if you can, though some might think it would have been better

Most significant choices between two courses of action that we encounter in life, however, are not much like selecting which brand of coffee to buy... Yet there can be choices which leave no reasonable way out and which can't be avoided.

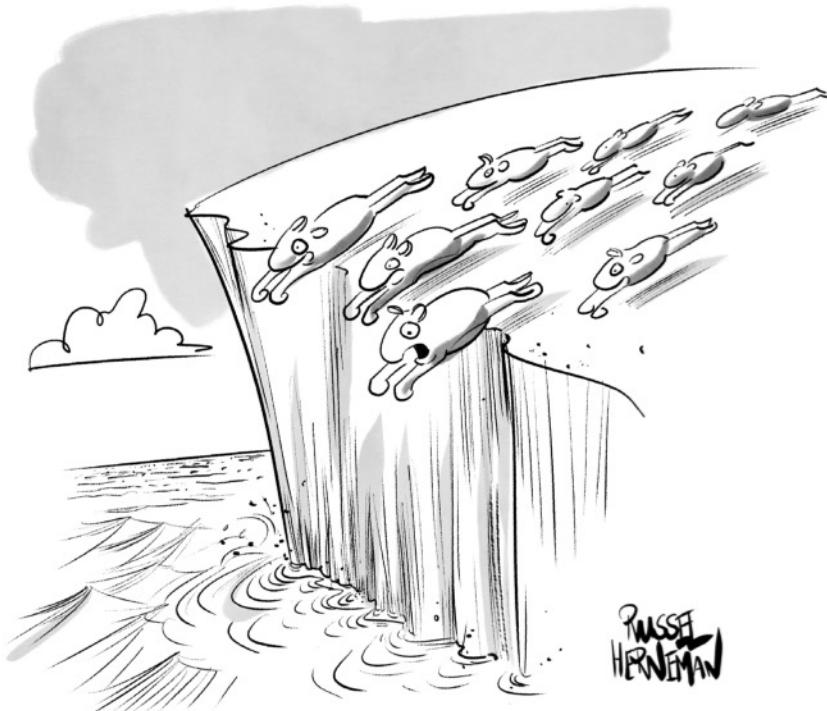
For a utilitarian thinker, pulling the man off the ladder would be the right thing to do and could be described as sacrificing one person to save many.

to have the whole family die together rather than play along with the Nazi's sick game.

Sophie's forced choice was a fictional one, but based on the kind of things that did happen in the Nazi era. These choices between courses of action where there is no straightforwardly right way to act do exist outside the realm of fiction too. For example, when the car ferry *The Herald of Free Enterprise* sank in a storm near Zeebrugge in 1987, there were many people in the icy water at risk of drowning, and rescue attempts were severely hampered by the weather. A young man tried to climb a rope ladder to escape the sea but had some kind of panic attack and couldn't move. He stayed frozen there for ten minutes and others behind him were at risk of drowning or dying

from the cold (193 people died in that disaster). Eventually someone pulled him off the ladder, and he is thought to have drowned, while the others were able to climb to safety. For a utilitarian thinker, pulling the man off the ladder would be the right thing to do and could be described as sacrificing one person to save many, maximising happiness and minimising suffering.

But no such cost/benefit analysis of different options in that situation capture the agony of having to go ahead and make that choice, and then living with having made it afterwards. This choice, like Sophie's, was in an important sense an impossible choice to make and choosing that action, or a different one, or no action at all, would all have led to terrible outcomes of different sorts. ■



"I'm just saying I think we should look again at our long-term decision making."





by Tom Chatfield

Are we free?

What's your view on free will? Do you have one – and, if so, how much confidence do you have in it? Does it matter what you think?

Most people don't worry about questions like this. 'Free will' sounds like the kind of abstraction only a philosopher could love. Words like 'choice', 'blame', and 'punishment', by contrast, have a painfully pragmatic edge. Yet all these beliefs are, at root, about the same thing: the degree to which our choices are or aren't free.

Consider a murderer. More specifically, consider an adult who plots to shoot their neighbour dead, does so, and is then caught and found guilty of committing this crime. What should be done with them?

Your answer is likely to depend on how far you think they were or

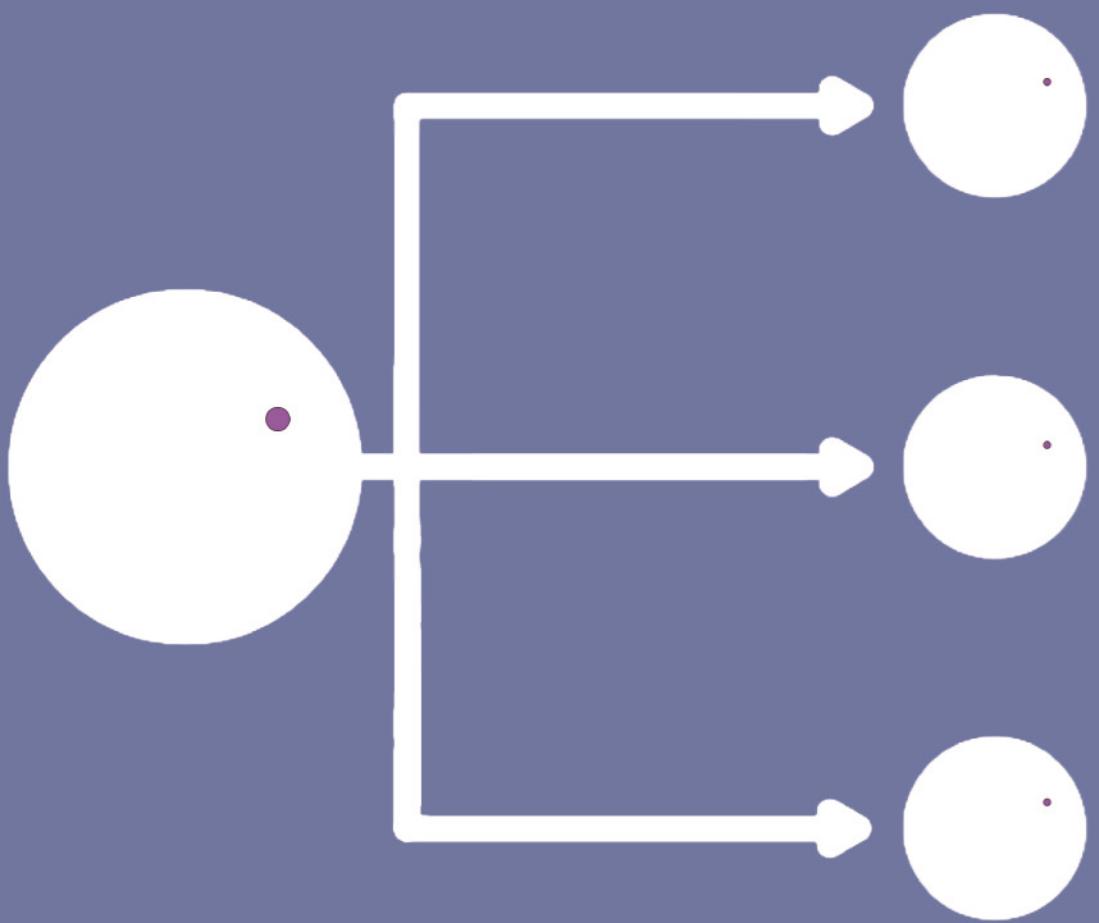
weren't responsible for their actions. Self-evidently, someone who commits a terrible crime while in the grip of an acute psychosis should be treated differently to someone who clear-headedly plans it over many months. Or should they? In one sense, someone suffering from a mental illness is no more or less responsible for who they are – their genetic inheritance, their family circumstances, the events and influences surrounding them – than a cold-blooded killer is for their character and place in society.

As the philosopher Gregg Caruso puts it in *Just Deserts: Debating Free Will*, a book-length dialogue between Caruso and the late philosopher Daniel Dennett, "the way we are is ultimately the result of factors beyond our control". On the basis that nobody can

or should be blamed for things that are beyond their control, Caruso suggests that nobody can freely choose their actions in a way that makes talk of blame and punishment meaningful.

As a result, Caruso advocates for a "quarantine" model of justice, treating criminality as a pathology resulting from genes and circumstances. For pragmatic reasons, he accepts that killers should be kept away from others. But the appropriate way to frame their actions is in terms of public health, not punitive justice.

This is all very well. In another sense, however, Dennett argues that the very fact that we can discuss such ideas – that people can read and write books exploring them; that they can weigh up arguments and evidence, then reach their own conclusions –





suggests a fundamental form of agency based upon self-reflection. Nobody chooses to be born, nor the world they're born into. But this doesn't mean there is no such thing as choice; simply that no choice is perfectly free. Free will is a capacity we gradually and effortfully grow into: an imperfect, incremental negotiation with our circumstances that is precious precisely because it's so constrained.

As Dennett puts it, "there really are people with mental disabilities, who are not able to control themselves, but normal people can manage under all but the most extreme circumstances, and this difference is both morally important and obvious." No one is born with true self-awareness or self-control. But our gradual maturation is significant precisely because it entails a rational animal becoming capable of such things. This capacity is unique to our species, not to mention compromised and imperfect. But so are most things 'worth wanting'. Equating free will with perfect self-control is a philosophical chimera.

For Caruso, it's the notion of self-control that's wishful thinking. Why? Because any and every capacity we possess is only ours thanks to forces we don't control. If you're unfortunate enough to lack the insight, willpower or opportunity to practise self-reflection, you cannot and should not be held responsible for this lack any more than if you're lucky enough to be disciplined and virtuous. "Either

actions are subject to present luck (luck around the time of action), or they are subject to constitutive luck (luck in who one is and what character traits and dispositions one has), or both," Caruso writes. It's luck all the way down.

As you may have guessed, I lean towards Dennett's side of the argument, albeit with caution. It seems self-evident that nobody is wholly responsible for their actions: that we are born and die within a vast, unchosen universe. But this doesn't mean that whatever we are, or may become, is dictated by the past in a way that empties 'choice' of meaning.

As Dennett puts it, "your past does not control you; for it to control you, it would have to be able to monitor feedback about your behaviour and adjust its interventions – which is nonsense." We are free – or, at least, capable of growing towards freedom – in the only sense that matters, in that we are capable of understanding reality sufficiently well to play a part in shaping its future. Freedom isn't about overcoming the universe's dictates. Quite the reverse. It's about recognising the permeability of the boundary between the self and everything else – then exerting some measure of influence in the light of this knowledge.

Dan Dennett died at the age of 82, on 19th April 2024. I was lucky enough to speak to him a few months before this, discussing his lifelong explorations of cognition, technology, and evolutionary theory alongside

his final book, *I've Been Thinking*. We covered a great deal of ground – and, in particular, the troubling potentials of technologies like Artificial Intelligence. The more we are deceived, he believed, the less free we become. A choice made upon the basis of misleading or inaccurate evidence does not belong to us: it has, in effect, been rigged or pre-decided elsewhere. Free will is thus a pragmatic, collective project: one predicated upon education, information, self-reflection, and the pursuit of knowledge.

At the end of our conversation, Dennett turned towards an intimate theme: parenthood. "My children are both adopted," he told me. "But I love them with the intensity of any biological dad. I can remember a moment in the early life of our eldest, when she was a little girl, maybe two years old or less, when I detected some possible threat, and it suddenly struck me, 'Oh, my goodness, I think I would kill to protect this child.' And it scared me, almost. But it also thrilled me, because it was a recognition of the intensity and depth of emotional attachment. And that's what life is all about."

We do not choose our parents or children, our circumstances or opportunities, the wellsprings of sentiment that define us. We are chosen by them. But how we make sense of this – the love, the hope, the fear, the inevitability of loss – is up to us in the only sense that matters. In as much as we are able to know ourselves, and one another, we are free. □

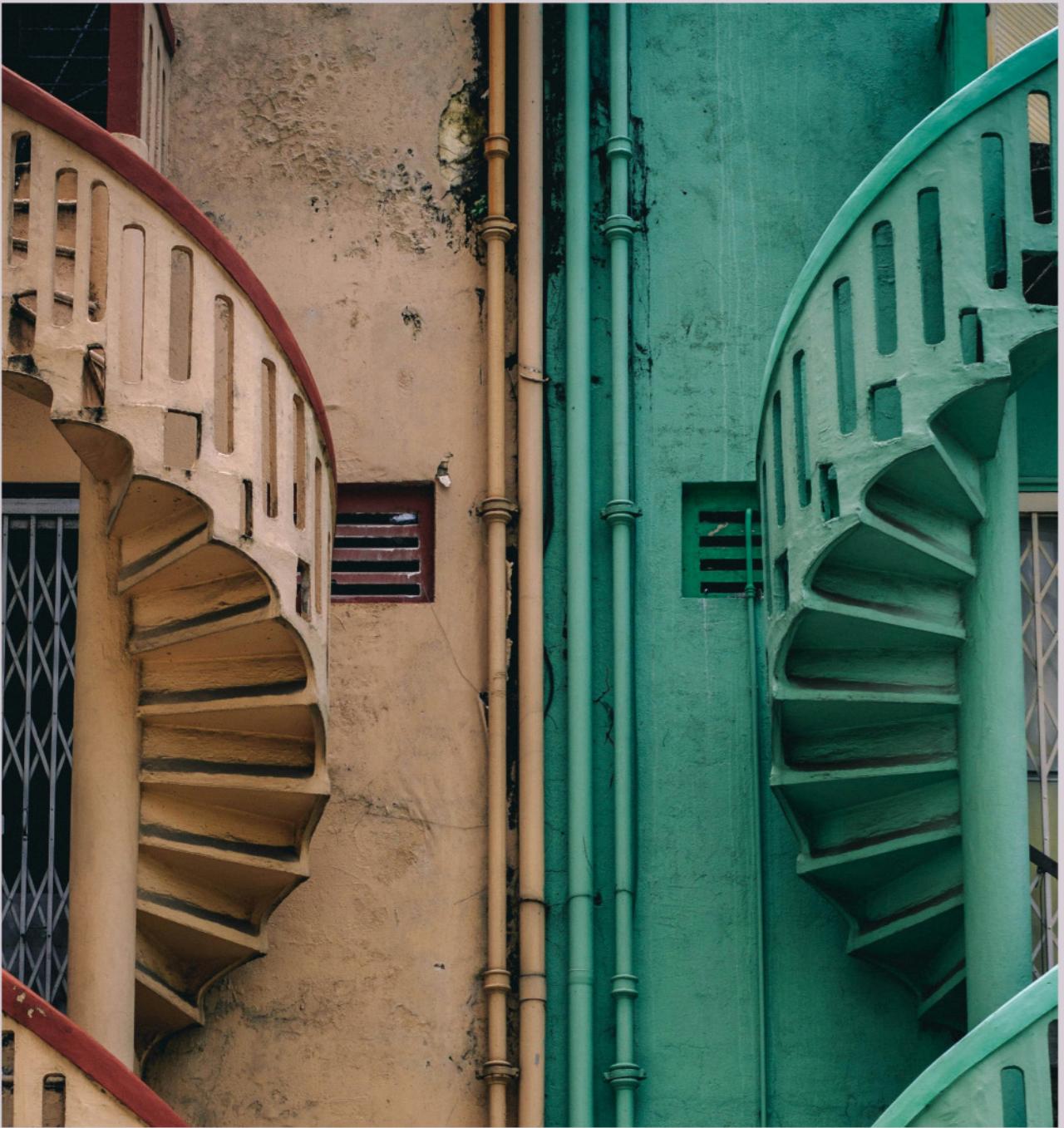


Photo: Gregoire Janneau

“Every person, if he so wills, can become a paradigmatic human being, not by brushing off his accidental qualities, but by remaining in them and ennobling them. He ennobles them by choosing them.”

Søren Kierkegaard





“We now face a demand to make choices that is unparalleled in human history”. - Barry Schwartz

Interview with:
Barry Schwartz

Interviewer:
Zan Boag

The paradox of choice



Barry Schwartz is the Dorwin Cartwright Emeritus Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College and since 2016 has been visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley. His work focuses on the intersection of psychology and economics. Schwartz's research addresses morality, decision-making, and the inter-relationships between behavioural science and society. His books criticise certain philosophical roots of western societies and expose underlying myths common in both lay and academic psychological theories. In particular, he is a critic of the "rational economic man" model in both psychology and economics. Schwartz is the author of several books, including *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, *Psychology of Learning and Behaviour*, with Edward Wasserman and Steven Robbins, and *Why We Work*.

Zan Boag: It's hard for me not to start with an obvious question, which is: with all the options available to you as a psychologist – of course you've delved into a range of other topics: human nature, learning, behaviour, work – but why did you originally choose choice?

Barry Schwartz: This turns out to be a more complicated question than you might imagine. Much of my work was focused on criticising the conception of human nature that you get from economics, that economists hold, and criticising some of the effects of the free market on the character of American society, and also human welfare and well-being. It certainly has its upsides, but it's a cruel tool for promoting material well-being.

Anyway, I wrote two books about the evils of using the lens of the market to focus all aspects of your life. And the one thing that always stopped me in my criticism is that the voice in my head or someone else

would say, "But what about freedom of choice? The market caters to freedom in a way that nothing else you can think of will do. No one's forcing you to buy anything. No one's forcing you to sell anything. It's just the perfect institutional structure to enhance freedom." And I would shrug my shoulders and say, "Well, you're right."

And then this article came out, this paper that showed this – the famous 'jam study'. The study showed that choice is good, but if you give people too many options, instead of liberating them, it paralyses them. And the assumption is that rational people, if they don't want all those options, they'll just ignore them. That turns out, as an empirical matter, not to be true. And that was what I was looking for, although I didn't know it.

And so, it got me thinking really quite hard about this presumption that if freedom is good, more freedom is better. And that led ultimately to



Photo: Jan Genge

the book. It turned out it was not just a curiosity, but really a profound contribution to the view of the world that I had, that was not fully developed.

This focus on freedom, which has been a cornerstone of western thinking, is it the case that we are aiming for 'more' freedom because more freedom is necessarily a good thing?

You don't even have to make an argument. It's just self-evident.

That's right. And choice is one of those things that is essential for freedom. Without choice, freedom is impossible, but too much of it, as you are saying here, as you discovered, it can lead to a range of psychological challenges for humans. We have decision paralysis, we are not sure what to do; we have regret. How is it that too much choice can

negatively affect our well-being – what psychological mechanisms underlie this paradox of choice?

There are a few. First of all, it's really a cognitive challenge when you're confronted with say, 2,000 options when it comes to buying a pair of jeans, trying to figure out which pair of jeans to buy. The truth of the matter is that most of the differences among them are trivial, but you don't know that. In order to discover that most of the differences among them are trivial, you've got to spend a lot of time and energy looking at them. And then you finally say, "Oh, there really isn't much difference between these."

But then you also eventually buy one, and, as you choose, you're thinking about the nice features of some of the others that you're going to be passing up, like the stitching on the

back pockets. You probably didn't give a lot of thought to what the stitching on the back pockets of the jeans should look like.

But once you've looked at all of them, the jeans that don't fit you very well have great stitching. The style, the brand has wonderful trademark stitching, and you go, "Oh, if only they fitted me better, I'd buy those." And then you buy the ones you buy and you say, "Oh, if only they had the stitching I like so much, I'd have bought those." And so, it ends up that all the attractive features that you're saying no to subtract from the satisfaction you get from the one that you said yes to.

There are two problems. One is it gets really hard to decide, and this is a trivial thing like jeans. Imagine you're choosing a job or a place to live or a romantic partner and all the



"And if I tell you they are all moral philosophers...?"

complexities associated with jeans – where it really doesn't matter very much if you make a mistake – get enormously magnified. It matters a lot if you choose the wrong romantic partner.

It produces paralysis because it is really hard to make the decision, and you end up much less satisfied because you're thinking about all the attractive alternatives that you said no to. Is it inevitable? Probably not. But it takes a kind of discipline to suppress that. And it takes you by surprise. When I wrote the book a long time ago, it was a different world – the problem was bad when I wrote the book; it's much worse now.

I recall in one of your talks, you mentioned how you decided to set 20 per cent less when it came to assignments and work for your students because they were having to make decisions about a whole range of different matters – as a result students today simply didn't have as much time as students in the past.

That was my interpretation. What I realised, or what I thought, I never gathered data on this in any official way, but when I went to school, so many of the really important decisions we face in life were essentially made for us. People were not plagued by questions of sexual identity. They weren't plagued by questions about what their romantic life should look like. Should I have a girlfriend? The default was yes. Should I get married? The default was yes. When should I get married? Soon as I graduated from college. That was the default, and so on. And so, there were still issues like, how do I find the right person?

But it wasn't the case that everything about your daily life was an issue. I could focus on doing my

studies without having these other really important things intrude on my thinking and distract me. Well, this was much less true for my children and it is ever so much less true for my grandchildren.

In a cartoon that you had in your TED talk, there was a couple taking their wedding vows and instead of saying "I do" the man says, "She'll do". Another major problem faced by current generations, as you're saying, is finding a partner. We've been talking about all these products and services they are prompted to buy, but finding a partner is something that will determine their future to a large extent. Given dating apps have seemingly unlimited choices, how can people be satisfied with the partner that they have? Things inevitably get tough in relationships, and it's never been easier to find a new partner. You talk about the difference between maximizers and satisficers. With the maximizers, do you think they're the ones who are going to suffer the most in this world of unlimited choices?

I do indeed. I do. The thing about the distinction is that a maximizer is looking for the best. A satisficer is looking for good enough. And as a satisficer, you can have low standards for what breakfast cereal you eat. And you can have high standards, for example, for who you marry, but you're not looking for the best. And the critical difference is that when you're looking for good enough, once you find good enough, you stop looking, even though there are countless alternatives that you haven't looked at. If you're looking for the best, you can never stop looking.

And so, it's pretty trivial when it comes to breakfast cereal, but when it comes to a job or a romantic partner, it's not. And the thing that I



Photo: Barry Schwartz, by Bill Holsinger-Robinson

believe happens is that you think your task in searching for a life partner is the search. And that once you succeed in finding the person, it's smooth sailing from then on.

And that I think is a profound mistake. The task is not as much the search as it is what you do after you conclude the search. As you just said, there are rough spots in any relationship. Often the rough spots are concerned with fairly trivial things like one of you is neat and one of you is messy. Little things that don't mean anything over a day or a week, but start to wear on you as the weeks become months and the months become years.

And so, there's an enormous amount of work required in developing and maintaining the relationship. The challenge is not *finding* the right partnership,

it's making the right partnership. If you think that once you find the treasure, your work is done – you're in for a failure. And as soon as you go through a bad patch, you're looking over your partner's shoulder for somebody better, and your partner's looking over your shoulder for somebody better.

You know it is not an accident that people pair up later, and that relationships don't last as long, because our standards about what relationships should be like and continue to be like as they proceed is just an unmeetable standard. The world has set us up for virtually guaranteed failure.

It makes it particularly difficult with these big life decisions, whether it's jobs, where we live, or partners, because we're faced with so much choice. People can always wonder about the life they could have led had they made a different decision – say to pursue writing instead of banking; move to San Francisco instead of Sydney; ballroom dancing over Taekwondo. They're making choices that then will affect the way they lead their lives. Let's call this a phantom life, the 'other' life. How can

people find satisfaction with their choices when there are so many available, and the choices that they make will often seem like the incorrect ones? How can they find some sort of satisfaction?

I think in the book that I wrote, which by the way, as I told you in an email, I'm about to start writing a new edition of, I make some suggestions, but I think the truth of the matter is that it's very hard to shut off these enemies of satisfaction in the modern world. What we're talking about, and what I wrote about, is a rich society's problem.

Most people in the world don't have the problem that there are too many options. They have the opposite problem. But if you happen to live in a part of the world like you and I do, that is the problem. And we don't have the tools for shutting it down. I make some suggestions, like limit the number of options you consider. Fine. I'm only going to look at six pairs of jeans. It's one thing to say it and it's another thing to do it, and it's still a third thing to do it and not be nagged by the knowledge that there are all these options out there that you didn't look at.

It's sort of like just quitting smoking. "Yeah, I'll just quit smoking." Nice, easy to say, but really, really hard to do when you suffer at least initially when you quit smoking. And so, I think that you have to be prepared for a fair amount of discomfort and a lot of work to change your approach to making decisions, big ones or small ones.

It's not a surprise to me that young people are in such bad shape because one of the things that we found is that the younger you are, the more likely you are to be a maximizer in decisions. I think one of the things that you learn as you age is that good enough is almost always good enough. But you don't see too many 20-year-olds who think that. Experience teaches you that good enough is good enough.

After suffering for a generation or so, you settle into a life where you're satisfied with good enough results of your decisions. But meanwhile, that's 20 or 30 years of suffering. And what I think... I don't know if you're familiar with this somewhat controversial argument about what social media is doing to the welfare of young people.

It's not a surprise to me that young people are in such bad shape because one of the things that we found is that the younger you are, the more likely you are to be a maximizer in decisions.

We have other decision-making modes that we could rely on. One is habit. This is what I did yesterday. This is what I'll do tomorrow. I always have cornflakes for breakfast. That's good enough for me.

Here in Australia, they're implementing a law that prevents children under 16 from accessing social media.

I think that the evidence that has been amassed and reported is somewhat controversial because there are always multiple factors that explain things like a rise in anxiety and depression. It's not one thing. So, people say, "Well, what about this and what about this?" And yes, of course, but I don't think there's much doubt that social media addiction is a huge problem for psychological health. And one of the things that that exposure does is it shows you all the different ways you could be living and how well people other than you seem to be doing.

Because, of course, they don't present a random or even a remotely accurate picture of their own lives. They present this incredibly stylized picture of their own lives, which makes their lives look perfect. And you're going, "Why can't I have a life like that person's life?" And so, you're unsure what path you should be taking. And it seems as though the people you're interacting with are completely sure about the path they're taking. And so, you're just plagued by doubt about every decision you make, trivial or important.

When it comes to a comparison with others, that's something that is not just a contemporary problem. It has been exacerbated by the fact that we have so many choices and such an ability to compare our lives with others, but people have long regretted what they do or have compared themselves unfavourably to others. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote about this almost 200 years ago in Either/Or. He wrote that the essence of all life wisdom is that people will regret decisions no matter which one they take. I've got a quote here from him, "Marry and you'll regret it. Don't

marry, you will also regret it. Marry or don't marry, you'll regret it either way." And he goes on with a whole range of different things that people will inevitably regret, no matter the decision they make. However, today we are faced with many more choices than Kierkegaard was. So, rather than either/or, we have either/or/or/or ad infinitum. Regret is one problem, but how do we combat the decision paralysis that we face with this unlimited choice?

One is to teach yourself that good enough is good enough, because that reduces the number of options that you will seek out and evaluate. And as I say, teach yourself because it's going to take work to get into the habit of satisficing. Another is to do what I call choosing when to choose.

We have other decision-making modes that we could rely on. One is habit. This is what I did yesterday. This is what I'll do tomorrow. I always have cornflakes for breakfast. That's good enough for me. Another, which is a mega version of habit, is cultural and social tradition. This is what everyone does, this is what I'll do.

And what we've done in western democratic societies is that we have really just rejected people who just do the habitual thing or do what everyone else is doing. It seems 'inauthentic'. It seems like we're throwing away the incredible freedom that these societies we live in have given us, so we're contemptuous of other people who do that and we become critical of ourselves when we find ourselves doing it.

Instead of taking advantage of tools that would reduce the number of options we have, and reduce the number of domains where we have any options at all, we just keep breaking every constraint we find. And as I say, we're critical and disdainful of people who seem to embrace these

constraints. And this turns out not to be to our psychological benefit.

I imagine that this contributes to anxiety and stress, which, as you write, leads to lower satisfaction and happiness. Is there some data that supports this view; is there any data or are there any studies that support that it contributes to anxiety and stress and leads to lower satisfaction and happiness?

We've done studies that show that people who are oriented toward maximizing are borderline clinically depressed, using paper and pencil measures of depression. That's one. And I think, pardon me, we don't have clear evidence for this, but I think that there's good reason to believe that the uncertainty people feel contributes to anxiety.

I just read an article just this morning that makes the following point: the more uncertain you are that you are in control of things that matter in life, the more attracted you are to people who are just like you, the more rejecting you are of difference – gender difference, racial difference, ethnic difference. When the world seems certain to you, when you feel like you're in control, then you're more open to all these differences. But when the world seems uncertain, you want to, as it were, build a little world where everything is predictable and everything is familiar.

Here we are living in, depending on what society you live in, highly diverse societies in a very uncertain world. And this diversity is just another threat. And so, we try to simplify and make the world we live in more predictable because we don't feel like we are in control of our lives.

The paradox is, in some sense, you have more freedom of choice so you have more control, but it feels like you have less control. And the result is that

you do all kinds of things to make your world more certain. And some of those things are really problematic, not just for you, but for society. I don't want to be grandiose here, but it's not inconceivable to me that part of what explains the result of the recent election here in the US may be this feeling that people have that they are not in control of their lives.

And the reason they feel this way is that they can't make a decision without being uncertain about whether the decision they made is the right decision. People are willing to submit to a certain amount of authoritarianism, not to make the trains run on time, but to make the world more predictable and make them feel more in control.

And it may not be an accident that the rise of right-wing governments in democratic societies seems to be spreading all over the world. It's potentially an extremely consequential problem because it affects not just the satisfaction you get out of what ought to be a satisfying life, but it also affects what you want your social structure to look like.

Do you feel that when people are feeling uncertain about the way things are going in the world, they then reach for certainty in some way?

Correct. And certainty takes the form of familiarity. Certainty takes the form of reducing difference. Do you look forward to going to a party where there are people of multiple races, nationalities, religious affiliations and so on? In a world where life is predictable, this may be an interesting and stimulating possibility – people are exposed to different views of the world, and that enriches your life.

But in a world where you don't know what tomorrow's going to look like, for you, this is the last thing

People are willing to submit to a certain amount of authoritarianism, not to make the trains run on time, but to make the world more predictable and make them feel more in control.

you want. There were these wonderful studies of young children. They're called the 'Strange Situation' studies. Very young children. You put them in a room that has a bunch of toys in it, and the caretaker brings them in. And in one condition, the caretaker sits in the room while the child explores what's in it. And in another condition, the caretaker leaves the room.

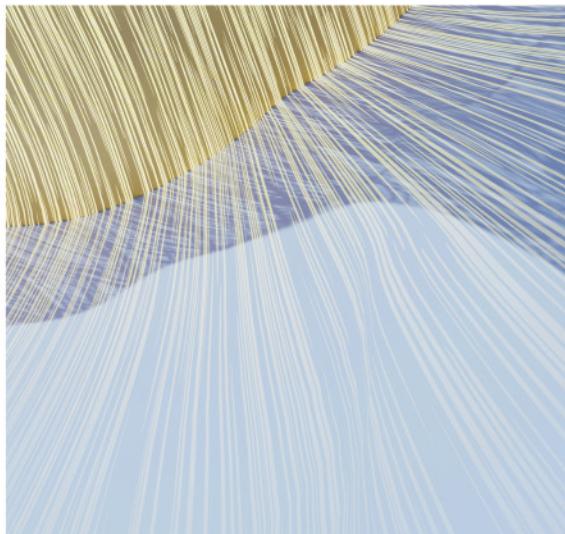
It turns out that when the caretaker stays in the room, the more stuff is in the room, the happier the kid is. The kid ventures away from the caretaker and explores, but then goes back to the caretaker or just looks back at the caretaker to reconnect with certainty and security and explores and explores and explores. When the caretaker is absent, the child is terrified by all the stimulation. It's like, "Get me out of here."

And so, in an uncertain world, you want certainty. Your mother, your father provides that certainty. And seeing that certainty there makes you willing to explore. In a certain world, you'll go to that party that has all these people who are so different from you. But in an uncertain world, you want to surround yourself with people who are just like you to introduce a little bit of certainty and predictability to the world.

And I think that buying jeans is trivial, buying cereal is trivial. These are all trivial, but the trivial add up. The example that I currently use when I give talks about this, because I think it connects with people more, is deciding what video to stream on Netflix. I don't know if you've ever had this experience, but very often after a hard day, my wife and I will sit down and decide to kick back and watch a movie. So, we go to Netflix and try

to decide what movie to watch. And after 40 minutes of searching, we turn off the TV and read a book.

It's interesting that you're talking about these trivial matters relating to products and services. Jean-Paul Sartre, he believed that humans are condemned to be free; that they must make choices. With the number of choices that we have now, condemned is probably an appropriate term. He was referring, it seems,



to big life decisions rather than whether we have a decaf soy latte or caramel mocha with stevia. But it leads me to my question: how can we make choices, these important life choices when so much of our time is taken up with decisions about what to watch on Netflix, or trivial matters relating to various products and services? How do we focus on the big life decisions when every hour of every day we're making choices about trivial matters?

That's a huge problem, a huge problem. And it's not like if you decide that you're not going to be plagued by it, the choices are going to disappear. They're there. You can live your life as a Luddite or try to live your life as a Luddite, but still they're all out there.

They steal your time and attention away from other things.

I read an article recently in the newspaper that university professors of literature who routinely would assign, say, to read this book for the next two weeks and then we'll turn to this book, and read that book in the next two weeks, and then we'll turn to this book. Students were coming up and saying, "I can't do this."

And discussion would reveal that throughout their educational career, they had never read a serious book from cover to cover. Instead of assigning *Hamlet*, you would assign Act 4 of *Hamlet* because you couldn't expect students to read the whole play. And why can't they? Because they don't have time. And why do they not have time? Because they're so busy making other decisions in their lives. And so, what do you do as a teacher? You either say, "Well, listen, dammit, you're going to read a book every two weeks or you're going to fail the course," or you find ways to adapt what you teach to what your students are prepared to learn. And so, I think you're right.

I used to have this habit when I had a bunch of big things, big tasks on my plate, I would invent small tasks, I'd write a to-do list with a dozen things on it, and I would keep adding trivial things to it so I could do them and tick them off and push the hard things down to the bottom of the stack; so I never got to them. Whether we like it or not, these small decisions intrude on our lives – take time, take energy, take cognitive resources, and we don't devote the time that we should to the big things. We end up either uncertain about the big decisions we make, or unsatisfied with them after we make them.

We are presented with so many choices and these choices are bleeding into every aspect of our life, whether it's which jeans to get, partners, jobs, what entertainment to watch. This is our reality now, as you said, even being a Luddite, there's little chance of avoiding this. How can we mitigate the negative effects of unlimited choice? You've touched on it before, but is there a way that we can prepare ourselves and set ourselves up in life so that we can minimise the negative effects of unlimited choice and maximise making good decisions about the important choices in our lives?

Yes, I think we can. But again, I emphasise that all of the suggestions I have take some work and are going to be uncomfortable until we get used to them. One of them, as I said, is looking for good enough rather than the best. Another is relying on habit or social custom. Another is delegating choices to other people. You need a new cell phone. Instead of choosing a new cell phone, talk to your friend who recently got one. And if your friend is satisfied with the phone that he or she got, you just get the same phone.

You can informally delegate to others the decision making that society simply insists that you do. Now, none of that is going to feel good at the beginning. It seems irresponsible not to make your own decisions. It seemed like you don't have high enough standards if you are just looking for good enough and you're going to feel always like you've left something on the table.

But what happens, I think, over time is you suddenly discover that two more hours have been added to your day. And you go, "Where did they come from?" "Oh, I get it. I'm not spending two hours deciding what to watch on Netflix. I'm actually watching something instead."

And so, over time, you see the benefits of doing this in A, that you have more freedom to devote your attention to things that you think are more important. And B, you're less uncertain about the decisions that you make. You're worrying less about the decisions other people are making because part of why we look so much at what other people are doing is to help us figure out what we should be doing.

If you simply default in certain areas of your life to doing what other people are doing or what have you, buying what your friend bought, then you feel less need to check your decisions against the decisions that other people are making. I think there are a bunch of tools.

The problem is that the societies we live in are fighting against us using these tools. The thing is that in a market, societies want us always to be dissatisfied with what we have because they want us to be looking for new things or new activities. Everywhere you turn, you're being pushed by social forces in a direction that I think is actually quite injurious to well-being.

It's not simply like flipping a switch and you become the kind of person who can cope in the modern

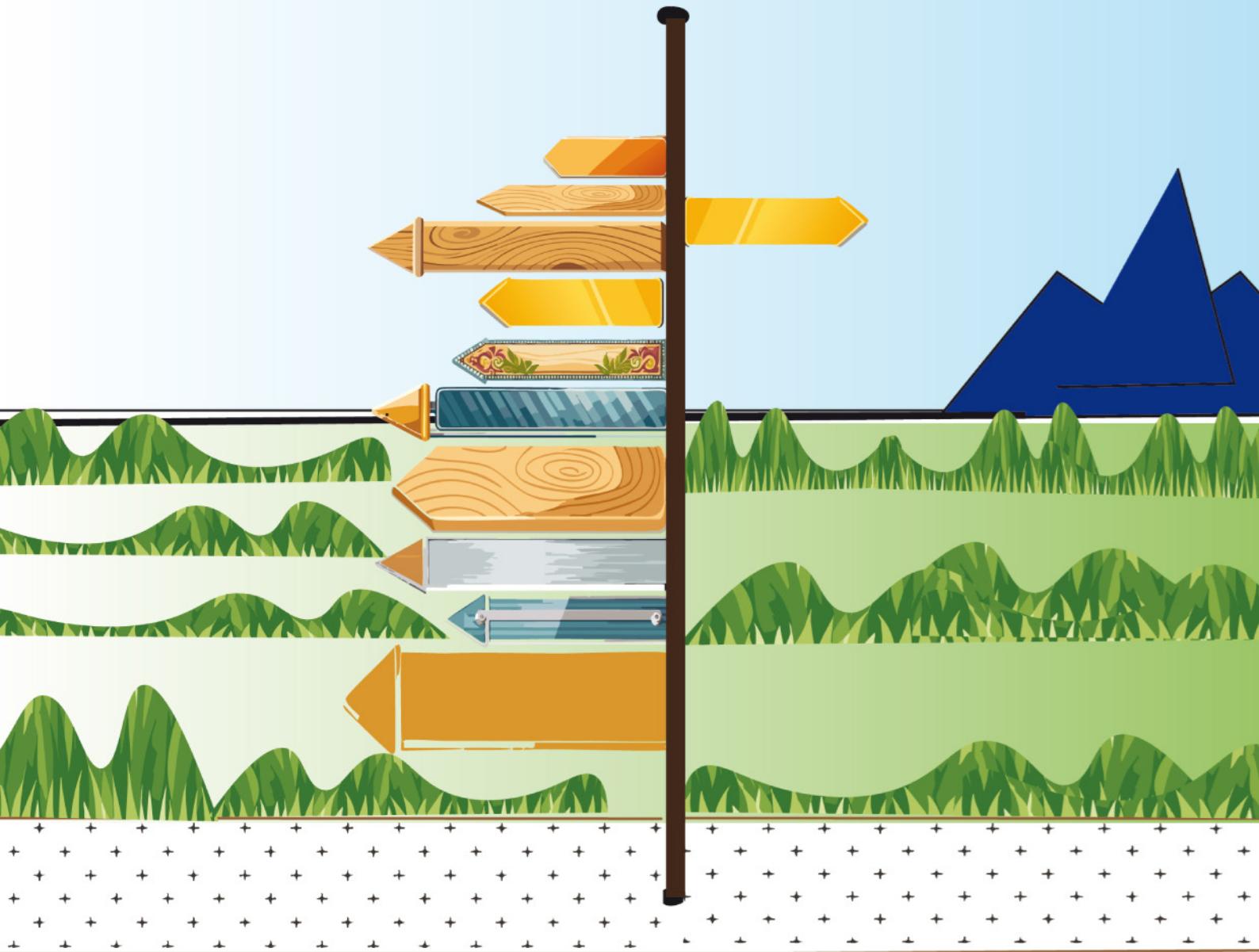
world. It takes discipline and energy to put the blinders on when they need to be put on. I think that people benefit enormously by doing it, but I don't want people to think that it's like taking a pill. It's work.

And I think the fact that these forces are at play makes it all the more important that we make an effort to do something about this.

I do too. And the thing that is so troubling to me is that there's an enormous social cost to this. It takes enormous resources to make the range of options that are available to us available. It's more costly to produce 2,000 kinds of jeans than to produce two. And you'd think maybe it's worth the cost if the result is that people get more satisfaction out of the decisions they make. But if it turns out they get less satisfaction, then it's just an enormous waste of resources that could be devoted to meet the needs of people who can barely meet their daily needs as they currently are.

We're devoting enormous resources to things that don't make people better off. And that really is heart-breaking – I think we're paying a very large price. Partly I think we're paying a price in global warming. We are certainly paying a price in terms of the distribution of material goods within societies, and we're not deriving the benefit collectively.

It's not just how to be happier as an individual, it's about how to be happier as a society. □



“What we really mean by free will... is the visualising of alternatives and making a choice between them.”

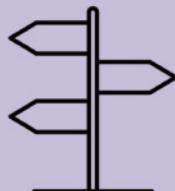
Jacob Bronowski

“When conflicted between two choices, take neither.”

– Nassim Nicholas Taleb

“Life often presents us with a choice of evils, rather than of goods.”

Charles Caleb Colton



C

“When I choose a word... it means just what I choose it to mean... nothing more nor less.”

Humpty Dumpty

“Guess, if you can, and choose, if you dare.”

Pierre Corneille

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“The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice.”

George Eliot

“There's small choice in rotten apples.”
William Shakespeare

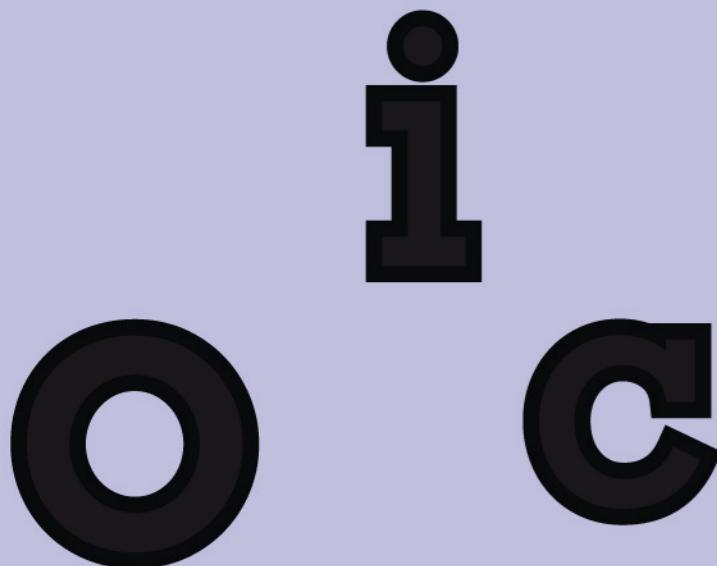
“He only is a well-made man who has
a good determination.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“He that will not when he may,
When he will he shall have nay.”

Robert Burton

“Better to sink beneath the shock
Than moulder piecemeal on the rock!”
Lord Byron



“Once to every man and nation
comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood,
for the good or evil side.”

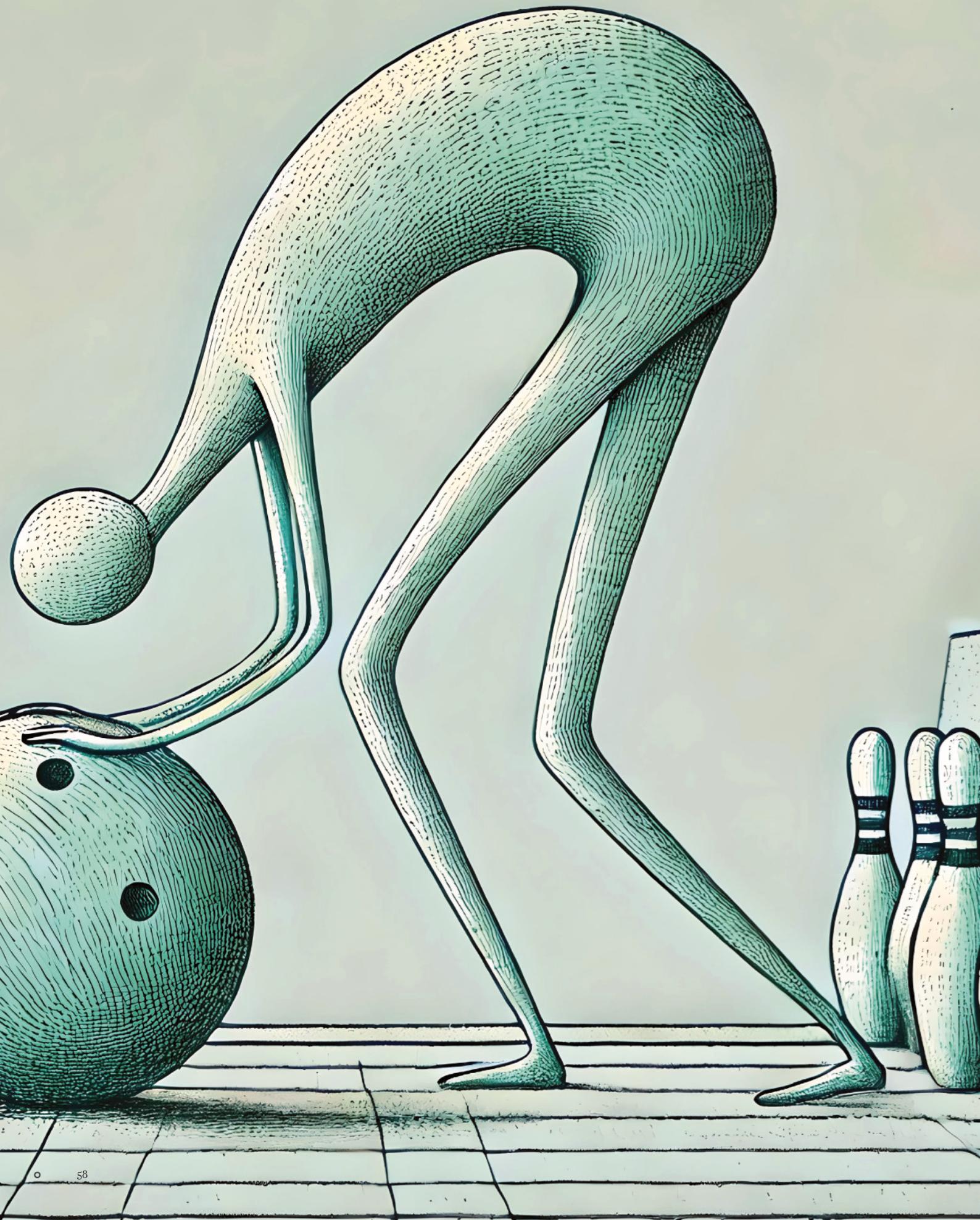
James Russell Lowell

“Men must be decided on what they
will NOT do, and then they are
able to act with vigour in what they
ought to do.”

Mencius

“The difficulty in life is the choice.”

George Moore



by Mariana Alessandri

Mindset and manifestation

“Mindset! Mindset! Mindset!” said the mother of the boy sitting with my son at Nationals, the yearly chess tournament for kids 5-18 years old. Our boys were 9, but they had been ingesting messages like this for years. Mindset’s outside voice cheers: “Believe in yourself!”, but the thousands of players that day couldn’t help but hear the low-rattle hissing underneath: “Losing means you didn’t believe hard enough.”

When the chess-mom used the term “mindset”, she was tapping into a worldview that links beliefs with outcomes, intentions with results. Manifestation is the end of the line for this logic; it’s the idea that you can literally

make your wishes come true through a series of practices like writing down your goals and visualising them every day. Manifestation is a ‘religion’ that requires faith and works, steadfastness and elbow grease. Any acolyte will tell you it’s less like wishing on a shooting star and more like army-crawling, hour by hour toward your goal, amidst a storm of doubts, insecurities, and hecklers. People who manage to manifest their dreams swear by it and insist that success begins with adopting the right outlook. *Like The Little Engine That Could*, you must think you can.

The “believe” half of “believe and succeed” is not new. The ancient Stoics

would have agreed with manifesters that some attitudes are better than others. Also, that a person’s attitude is directly related to their level of happiness. For the Stoics, *ataraxia*, or freedom from worry, is a choice, and it’s possible only when we realise that we have supreme control over the innermost parts of life: our feelings, moods, and reactions. We can choose to be offended by a sibling’s passive-aggressive remark, or we can smile, remembering Epictetus’s idea that no one can injure us if we do not let them. Our attitude is up to us, he said, so the Negative Nellies of the world are to be pitied, not scorned. The right mindset can go a long way.



But the Stoic endorsement of mindset ends there. They would have us put more space between input and output; that is to say, they didn't think that mindset led to manifestation. No, for Stoics, the right mindset involves admitting that an extraordinary number of things are out of our control, way more than are in our control. Epictetus thought we would only be truly happy when we stop trying to control "externals", like our jobs, health, reputation, and loved ones. Worldly success is simply "not up to us", so our energy is better spent practising how we will handle what's about to blow our way, instead of how to strain ourselves willing goodies into being. If my son were a Stoic, it would matter more to refrain from gloating or sulking than to win the chess match. For Stoics, being a

virtuous person is incomparably greater than succeeding by external measures. "Mindset", in a Stoic context, means going with the flow of life as gracefully and with as much self-possession as possible, neither raging against your flat tire nor revelling in worldly recognition. And when a Stoic 'believes', it's not because they think life will unfold as they wish, but that they can handle whatever comes.

Manifestation is the opposite of Stoicism; logically, it's why Stoicism had to be invented. Epictetus, Seneca, Marcus – they were talking to people who injured themselves trying to twist fate's arm, who made themselves miserable chasing trophies over tranquillity. We are far from the realism – non-Stoics call it pessimism – that Stoics preached. So how could citizens of a

country in the middle of a Stoic renaissance, where bumper stickers read "Life's a journey, not a destination," simultaneously rub the hairy underbelly of manifestation as they tell loved ones: "With an attitude like that, no wonder you didn't get the job!" How were Americans seduced into believing that we attract the award by rehearsing the acceptance speech? The cheery chess-mom was closer to manifestation than to Stoicism when she insisted that the kids adopt a "winning attitude". She was channelling the voice of Norman Vincent Peale, pastor of the six-year-old and now 78-year-old President-elect Donald Trump.

In 1952, Peale published *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and it was a bold formula for transforming self-confidence into material accomplishments.



He advised readers to “staple indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding”. This man, whom they called “God’s salesman”, was an early proponent of prosperity gospel, the idea that God doesn’t want his followers (or pastors) to fail. Peale was building on the ideas of Dale Carnegie, who sixteen years earlier had published *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. In Carnegie’s formula, not only can I control my attitude, but other people’s as well.

Whereas the Stoic sphere of control is quite small – it clocks in at exactly one person – the sphere of control that Americans are offered by Carnegie, Peale, and today’s manifestation apologists is limitless. In my local elementary school, there is a mirror mounted at child-height, surrounded by the words “Meet the person responsible for your

words, success, choices, actions, grades.” Not only are we giving children the Stoic message that they can control their hands, temper, and moods, but we are also convincing them that they control their fate.

There is zero luck in this equation, zero circumstances, leaving only one person to blame if things don’t turn out right. Stoics made happiness a choice; now winning is, too. Whoever looks in that mirror and reads those words is bound to conclude that their success or failure comes down to how strongly they believe.

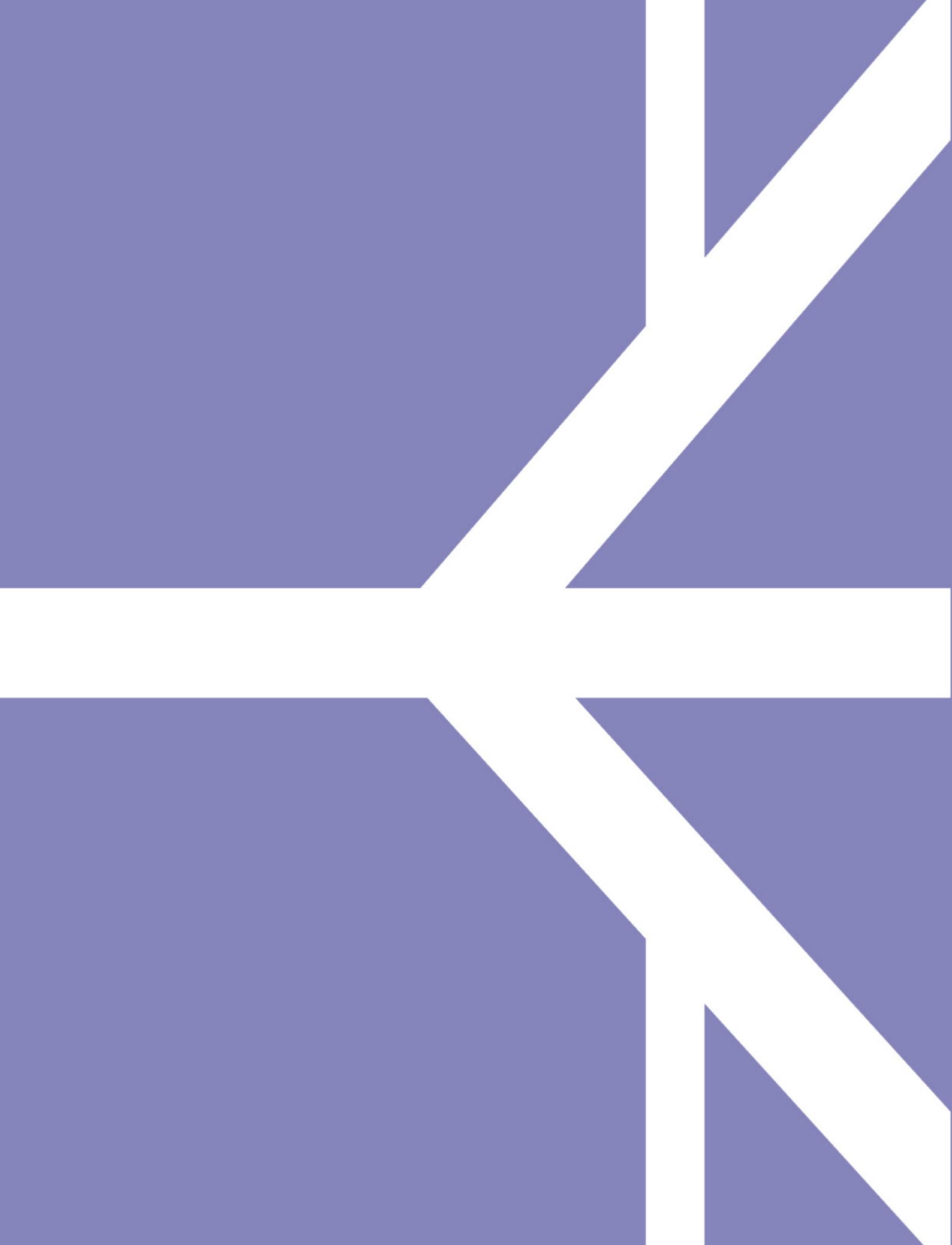
As was made painfully visible around the world on November 6th, 2024, the United States is deeply divided – and deeply mixed. We are the land of mindset AND manifestation, a curious and impossible mix of Stoicism and

Positive Thinking. We reject any hint of “I can’t” or “stop trying”, calling those ideas and their proponents pessimistic or weak, and decidedly un-American. Instead of taking the Stoic warning seriously, which would leave us simply (simply!) trying to get a hold of our moods, we have added “New Mindset, New Results.”

It’s the greediest philosophy imaginable, one that promises insides and outsides, virtue and trophies, God and mamon. We are doomed, but even to say this breaks the first commandment of the outlandish American religion that brought us a second term of Donald Trump.

At nine years old, I wasn’t playing chess; I was playing *Trump: The Game*. The tagline next to his face? “It’s not whether you win or lose, but whether you win!” ■

Not only are we giving children the Stoic message that they can control their hands, temper, and moods, but we are also convincing them that they control their fate.



CHOICE

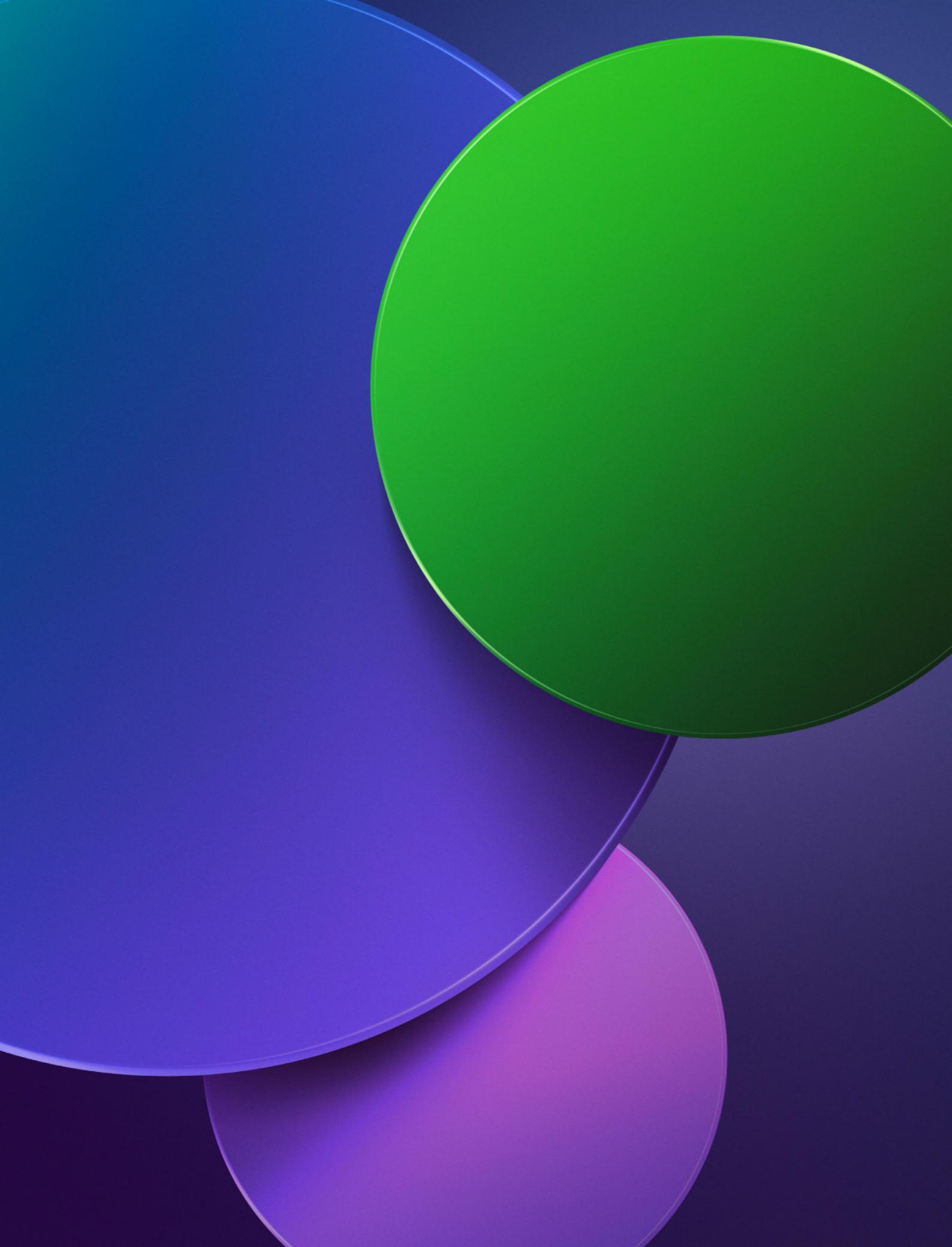
/tʃɔɪs/

noun:

1. an act of choosing between two or more possibilities; something that you can choose;
2. the right to choose; the possibility of choosing;
3. a person or thing that is chosen;
4. the number or range of different things from which to choose.

Origin: Middle English: from Old French *chois*, from *choisir* 'choose', of Germanic origin and related to choose.

Source: Oxford English Dictionary



by Myisha Cherry

In praise of emotional decision-making

Emotions interfere with our decision-making, or at least that is the thinking: emotional people seem to do irrational things. A person full of anger might commit a crime of passion. A man in love may do things that compromise his well-being. A woman filled with hate might vote against her self-interests. Surely, this is evidence against emotion's rationality. It's why we should continue to warn people about emotions, tell them to calm down before making any decision, or mock them for choosing their feelings over facts.

But this line of thinking couldn't be more wrong. Emotions are not only compatible with rationality, they can also help us make better choices.

The Vulcans, a humanoid species in Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*, would reject such a statement. Vulcans are known for their logic.

Although they have emotions, they suppress them so that reason can take control. In this way, the Vulcans are like the ancient Stoics, a philosophical school that believed emotions are based on mistaken beliefs about the world and, therefore, should be managed. The Vulcans' use of logic over emotions benefits their society in ways that have allowed them to experience thousands of years of peace and prosperity. This wasn't always the case. There was a time when there was much conflict (all caused by a lack of emotional control). In response, Surak – a philosophical sage and logician – and his followers took up logic as a philosophical doctrine. Soon, other members of the society followed, and it became part of the Vulcan culture to train themselves to rely only on reason. The Vulcan way of life might look controlled, rational, and thus

appealing. However, it is based on a fallacy, and outdated thinking in philosophy and psychology.

Baba Shiv, professor of marketing at Stanford University, writes that "if emotions were irrelevant, we would have evolved very differently". Since we have emotions, we must wonder why and how they help us, instead of trying to eliminate them. One answer is that emotions aid in rationality and decision-making.

The truth is that emotions and reason are not in conflict. Emotions are rational. They involve judgements. For example, being angry involves judging that a wrongdoing has occurred. That is a rational activity. Emotions also have epistemic roles. They motivate us to inquire about our own beliefs and help us to perceive the world differently, according to philosopher Alison Jagger. But emotions also give

When we are in an unpleasant affective state, like sadness or anger, we process information more systematically and effortfully. This allows us to make decisions that require realistic and accurate judgements.

us a reason to act. Fear, for example, gives us a reason to escape a situation. Anticipation of regret provides a reason to avoid excessive risk-taking.

Emotions can also help with decision-making. According to Shiv, one reason emotions are so functional is that “the emotional brain makes lightning-fast assessments based on past experiences, perceptions of the situation, and other factors that may not register consciously but which underpin our instincts.” This is a

powerful processing feature worth taking advantage of.

One of the challenges to making decisions is the problem of having too many choices. However emotions can help us to select and prioritise relevant choices. According to Antonio Damasio in his book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, this happens because of our affective system, which “provides immediate affective evaluations of each option’s relative goodness or badness for our personal well-being”.

Our affective states can also positively influence our decision-making. When we are in an unpleasant affective state, like sadness or anger, we process information more systematically and effortfully. This allows us to make decisions that require realistic and accurate judgements.

What’s more, the ability to identify and describe our affective states can positively affect our decision-making performance. In a study of 101 stock investors, neuroscientists Myeong-Gu Seo and Lisa Feldman Barrett found that “individuals who experienced more intense feelings achieved higher decision-making performance”, if they were also able to engage in ‘emotion differentiation’ via emotional regulation.

But what’s the point of deciding but not following through on our decisions? When we doubt our decisions, we are more likely to quit. Emotions can help with that, too. Baba Shiv claims that emotions help us commit to our choices. They give us “conviction confidence”, which is the belief that our choice is right.

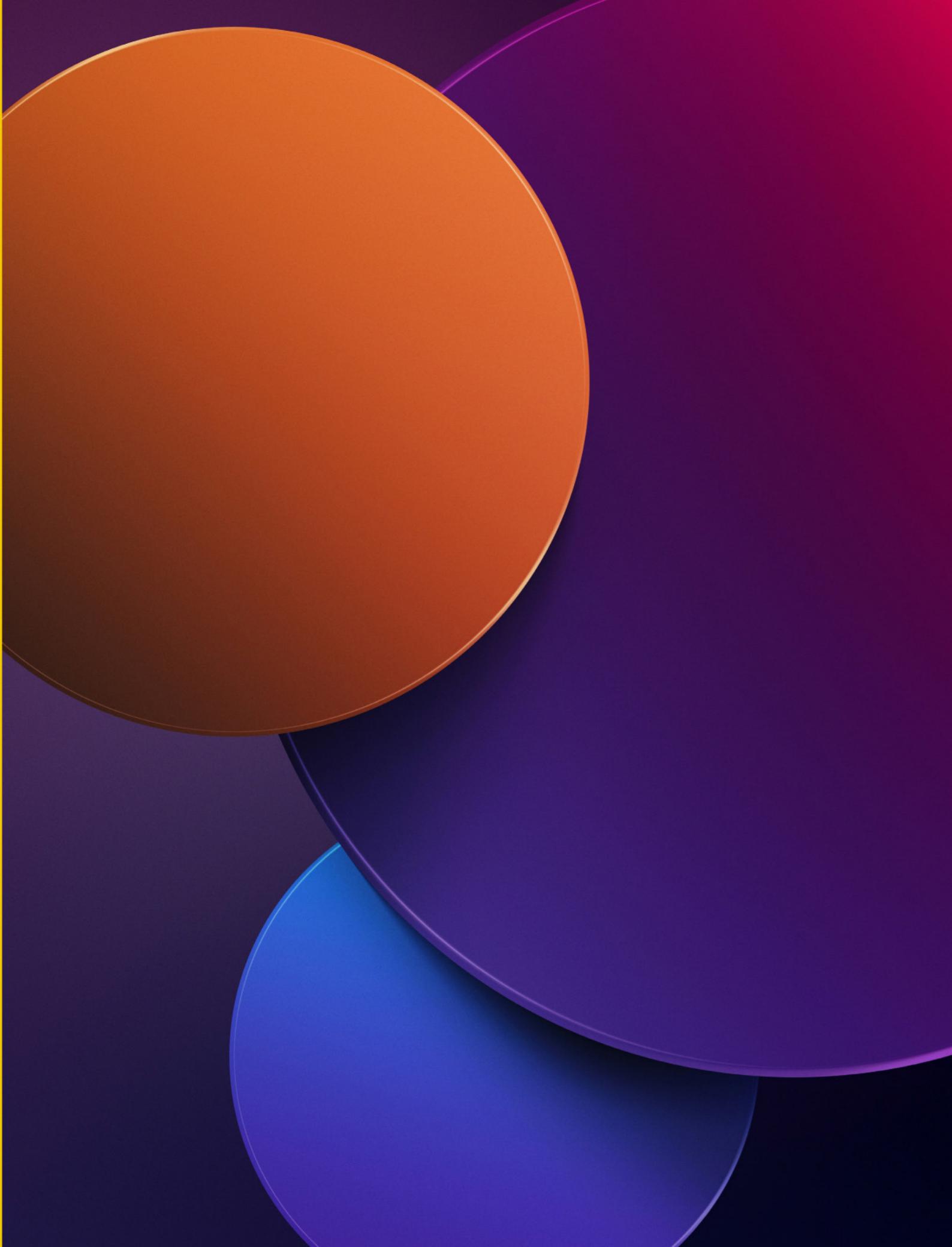
Emotions also help us make social decisions. For example, emotions can change decisions by evoking emotions in others. Your disappointment with a partner can evoke guilt

and cause them to engage in a reparative act. Your expression of fear toward others can motivate a concern in them that makes them choose less threatening behaviour.

Nonetheless, any situation can still go awry. Can we do anything to prevent our emotions from negatively impacting our decision-making? Seo and Feldman Barrett believe so, suggesting ways to reduce the unwanted effects of emotions on our decision-making. For example, if sadness makes us make poor decisions with our money by being reckless about spending, we might replace it with gratitude. This feeling might help us make a better, more moderate decision. We can also minimise (rather than suppress) our emotional response before deciding anything. This can happen by letting time pass before we decide. These strategies are often listed under emotional intelligence, which is the ability to manage and understand our emotions so that we can act and make decisions that align with our values. In this way, emotional intelligence helps us mitigate against tendencies to make less intelligent decisions.

We don’t have to be Vulcans or Stoics to be rational or make better decisions. Emotions are not the unreliable and destructive older sibling of the more rational, evolved part of our brain. Nor is there a sibling rivalry between them. They are more of a team than we once assumed. Of course, nothing is perfect, and our emotions can get the better of us. When they do, we always have a choice.

Humans have reason and emotions. Discounting one for the sake of the other denies our humanity. It also prevents us from using our emotions to help us make better decisions. Fortunately, we can choose differently. □



THE FUTURE OF HUMAN AGENCY

By 2035, will smart machines, bots and systems powered by artificial intelligence be designed to allow humans to easily be in control of most tech-aided decision-making that is relevant to their lives?

56% of experts agreed with the statement that by 2035 smart machines, bots and systems will not be designed to allow humans to easily be in control of most tech-aided decision-making.

44% said they agreed with the statement that by 2035 smart machines, bots and systems will be designed to allow humans to easily be in control of most tech-aided decision-making.

Alf Rehn

professor of innovation, design and management

“The future will clearly cut both ways. On the one hand, better information technologies and better data have improved and will continue to improve human decision-making. On the other, black box systems and non-transparent AI can whittle away at human agency, doing so without us even knowing it is happening. The real challenge will lie in knowing which dynamic is playing out strongest in any given situation and what the longer-term impact might be.”



Kathryn Bouskill

anthropologist and AI expert

“Some very basic functions of everyday life are now completely elusive to us. People have little idea how we build AI systems, control them and fix them. Many are grasping for control, but there is opaqueness in terms of how these technologies have been created and deployed by creators who oversell their promises. Right now, there is a huge chasm between the public and AI developers. We need to ignite real public conversations to help people fully understand the stakes of these developments.”

J. Nathan Matias

assistant professor at Cornell

“Because the world will become no less complex in 2035, society will continue to delegate important decision-making to complex systems involving bureaucracy, digital record-keeping and automated decision rules. In 2035 as in 2022, society will not be asking whether humans are in control, but which humans are in control, whether those humans understand the consequences of the systems they operate, whether they do anything to mitigate the harms of their systems and whether they will be held accountable for failures.”

Christopher W. Savage

legal expert

“In theory, a well-deployed AI/ML [machine learning] system could help people make rational decisions in their own best interest under conditions of risk and involving stochastic processes. But I suspect that in practice most AI/ML systems made available to most people will be developed and deployed by entities that have no interest in encouraging such decisions. They will instead be made available by entities that have an interest in steering people’s decisions in particular ways.”

Greg Sherwin

senior principal engineer

“Decision-making and human agency will continue to follow the historical pattern to date: It will allow a subset of people with ownership and control of the algorithms to exert exploitative powers over labour, markets and other humans. They will also operate with the presumption of guilt with the lack of algorithmic flagging as a kind of machine-generated alibi.”

Alejandro Pisanty

professor and Internet Hall of Fame member

“There are two obstacles to human agency triumphing: enterprise and government. Control over the technologies will be more and more a combination of cooperation and struggle between those two forces, with citizens left very little chance to influence choices. The trends indicate that the future design of decision-making tech will most likely not be determined by the application of science and well-reasoned, well-intended debate. Instead, the future is to be determined by the agendas of commercial interests and governments, to our chagrin.”

Heather Roff

senior research scientist, University of Colorado-Boulder

“Most users are just not that fluent in AI or how autonomous systems utilizing AI work, and they don’t really care. Looking at the studies on human factors, human systems integration, etc., humans become pretty lazy when it comes to being vigilant over the technology. Humans’ cognitive systems are just not geared to ‘think like’ these systems. So, when one has a lack of literacy and a lazy attitude toward the use of such systems, bad things tend to happen. People put too much trust in these systems, they do not understand the limitations of such systems and/or they do not recognise how they actually may need to be more involved than they currently are.”

Interview with:
Ruth Chang

Interviewer:
Zan Boag

Making hard choices



Ruth Chang is the Chair and Professor of Jurisprudence and a Professorial Fellow of University College. Prior to this, she was Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University, New Brunswick in New Jersey, USA; a visiting philosophy professor at the University of California, Los Angeles and a visiting law professor at the University of Chicago. During this period she also held a Junior Research Fellowship at Balliol College where she was completing her D.Phil. in philosophy. She has held fellowships at Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and the National Humanities Center and serves on boards of a number of journals. She has a J.D. from Harvard Law School.

Chang is the author and editor of several books, including *Making Comparisons Count* and *Hard Choices*.

Zan Boag: When you first started out making decisions about what you were going to do with your life, you had to make a difficult choice as a young student: law or philosophy. You chose law but then switched to philosophy. What drove each of the decisions and how did you decide on each occasion which choice to make?

Ruth Chang: I was a classic case of someone who was facing a hard choice and unable to commit to either option. So, I did what one typically does in these cases: I took the safest option, which of course was to go to law school, be financially secure, and, as the child of poor immigrants, give my parents the relief of ticking off one child-to-worry-about box. From the hundreds of letters I've received from people looking for help with their hard choices, I can report that I did what people are typically inclined to do, namely go for the least risky option. In short, in hard choices, people have an instinct or tendency to act out of fear of making the wrong choice, so they choose in a way to minimise potential future damage. This approach to hard choices is, I believe, profoundly mistaken, at the very least because in genuine hard choices there is no wrong choice.

Once I became a lawyer – don't get me wrong, it had its rewards – but the truth was, I wasn't committed to that life. I was, as the saying goes, 'going through the motions' and relying on external motivations and distractions

to keep me chugging along from one day to the next. But as often happens in hard choices, when you drift into one option – that is, you choose it without standing behind it and being committed to it – you eventually get yourself into the position of being able to commit to something. It might be to love or to leave the law. In my case, drifting into a legal career put me in a position to commit to being a philosopher. So, in short, what drove my decision to become a lawyer was fear, and what drove my decision to become a philosopher was commitment. Today I'm both. But mostly a philosopher.

I'd like to delve further into the idea that opting to minimise future harm is a profound mistake in hard choices, but first, can you explain more specifically what 'hard choices' are?

What makes a choice hard is how the options in fact compare with one another: neither option is better or worse than the other, but they aren't equally good either – it would be a mistake to flip a coin between them. At the same time, the choice is between options that can be compared – incomparable options lie outside the scope of rational agency, but the kinds of hard choices between careers, loves, places to live are all typical choices within the exercise of rational agency. I say that options in hard choices are 'on a par', comparable but just qualitatively different.



DELPHICA



Here's an example. Suppose you're choosing between a career as a lumberjack and one as a journalist. In making the choice, you will want to know things like how beautiful the outdoors will be in the lumberjack job, how interesting the stories you'll write about will be in the journalist job, and so on. But you likely can't know in advance all the details that you would reasonably regard as relevant to the choice. And so the choice seems hard because you don't know all the facts you need to make your decision. But now let's transport you to Mount Olympus or heaven where some omniscient, beneficent god lives. That god – or AI – who knows everything, is in a position to make the choice for you. But here's the kicker: in hard choices, even a god who knows everything would find the choice hard. This is because the two life paths you could occupy as a lumberjack and as a journalist – every detail of which the god knows – are just very different sorts of lives. One isn't better than the

other, and it's not that they're equally good either. They're just very different lives – they're on a par. That's why the choice is hard. So even if we had all the information that we in fact don't have, it doesn't follow that the choice would be easy. Even a god would find hard choices hard. They're hard because there is no best option.

Getting back to philosophy vs. law. Many people drift into the safest option in hard choices – you'd be surprised how many students become lawyers because they can't figure out what else to do with themselves – you drift not because you're lazy or stupid but because neither career is better than the other and more information wouldn't change this. You drift because you're not in a position to commit to either option, and so you dip your toe into one path in the hopes that you'll eventually be able to commit to that path or commit to taking a different direction. The key here is that having more information won't help you. You need to do something,

that is, commit to an option if you can. So the cure for hard choices isn't more information, it's commitment.

So your two careers are on a par. But what is parity? How is it different from equality? In the careers case, if neither career is better than the other and they are comparable, don't they have to be equally good? And why does it matter that in hard choices our options are on a par?

Well, here's a clue that the careers aren't equally good: it would be a mistake to flip a coin between them. Flipping a coin is always intrinsically rationally permissible when faced with equally good options. But there's also a little test you can perform to prove to yourself that in a hard choice, the options aren't equally good. Suppose you're struggling over where to go to school, where to take your next vacation, whether to quit your secure job to start your own business. After doing your due diligence, you conclude that neither option is

Here's the kicker: in hard choices, even a god who knows everything would find the choice hard.

better than the other. Must they then be equally good?

Here's the test. Improve one of the options a bit – enough to make it clearly better than it was before the improvement. So maybe you discover that mountain vacation now includes free ski rental. Does that improvement now make the mountain vacation better than the beach one? Probably not. If not, then the original vacations could not have been equally good. That's because if you take two equally good things – say, two identical strawberry sundaes – and you make one better – by adding some whipped cream on top – the improved one has now got to be better than the other. That's just part of the logic of equally good things. Improving one of them tips the scale in favour of that option.

But in hard choices, that's not so – you can make a small improvement to one of the options, and that won't settle the matter as to which you should choose. This is because in hard choices, options are on a par, and when options are on a par, they are qualitatively different and this difference can't be captured by the crude trichotomy of categories 'better', 'worse', and 'equal'.

So parity is distinct from equality in the way we've just seen: add value to one of the options in the case of equality and that tips the scales. Not so in the case of parity. Roughly speaking, parity holds between options that are qualitatively very different from one another – a career in hang-gliding and one in accounting – but neither is better than the other and nor are they equally good. If you think back on the hard choices you've faced in life, they will likely be between qualitatively different options.

Now you ask a good further question: why does parity matter? Well there's an ivory tower answer and a more in-the-world answer. The 'academic' answer might be illustrated by an analogy with Edwin Abbot's novella, *Flatland*. Abbot was a maths teacher in Victorian England who wrote a charming story about A Square, who sees his world in only two dimensions – everything is flat. One day, he meets A Sphere, who blows his mind by introducing him to three-dimensional space. Oh, A Square thinks, "I've been understanding the world according to the mistaken assumption that everything is flat – I've understood the world through blinkered lenses – because space is more complicated with more dimensions than I thought."

In a similar way, I believe, we have mistakenly assumed that the world of value is like the world of length, divisible into only three categories of being longer/better, shorter/worse, or equal/equally good. We've mistaken assumed Trichotomy, the view that things can be compared only in terms of the three relations of 'better', 'worse' and 'equal', and see the normative world through those blinkered lenses. In fact, the world of value is more complicated with a fourth dimension – parity – that helps us to understand hard choices. If we've misunderstood the world of value in this way, there are a lot of implications for the way we currently make policy decisions, distribute health care resources, conduct business, design technology, govern human life: we've got the wrong underlying picture of the oughts and shoulds of life and so we need to fix our approaches to decision-making to reflect the truth about human values, namely, that they can't be shoved into the three boxes of 'better', 'worse', and 'equal' but require



Ruth Chang, Edmond J Safra
Center for Ethics

a fourth box – 'parity'. Parity gives expression to qualitative differences among values.

The more in-the-world answer is that if in hard choices our options are on a par, we need to change the way we make decisions. Decision-making isn't trichotomous, it's tetrachotomous. Typically when we make decisions, it's as if we take out of our back pocket one of those old-fashioned balance scales and put our options on each of the pans of the scale. What we're trying to figure out is what the balance scale tells us to do: if one pan

dips down, then there's more reason to choose that option, and if the pans are evenly balanced, then the options are equally good and we can just flip a coin to make our choice.

But if in hard choices our options are on a par, the balance scale never settles. It doesn't tell us what to do. This means there's more to being a rational agent than just following what a balance scale tells us to do. Hard choices show us this. So the next time we face a choice, we need to have in front of our minds the possibility that while they can be compared, neither option is better than the other and nor are they equally good. They are on a par.

I just want to quote something you said in another interview. You spoke about making choices using reasons created by us, looking for reasons "in here". And the quote is, "When we choose between options that are on a par, we can do something that's really rather remarkable. We can put our very selves behind an option. Here's where I stand, here's who I am. I'm for banking, I'm for chocolate doughnuts. This response in hard choices is a rational response, but it's not dictated by reasons given to us. Rather, it's supported by reasons created by us. Instead of looking for reasons out there, we should be looking for reasons in here. Who am I to be?" I love this. How important is this process of putting our very selves behind an option when we're faced with a hard choice?

I believe it's absolutely central to what it is to be a rational agent. So the standard way of understanding rationality – it's risen to the level of dogma – is what I regard as a too-passive picture according to which our job as rational agents is to discover and follow the reasons given to us by the world. Here's a reason given to me by the world: there's a tiger around the

corner! That's a reason to run away! That's a reason 'out there', given to me by the way the world is. But in hard choices, the reasons 'out there' are on a par – the balance scale doesn't settle in favour of one option over another or tell you to go ahead and flip a coin. So instead, what you have to do in a hard choice is to create a reason from 'in here'. When I committed to being a philosopher, I created a reason for myself to become a philosopher that wasn't out there, given to me by the world. Hard choices are opportunities for us to create reasons for ourselves and make it true that we have most reason to pursue one path in life over another. That's why parity is so important to recognise as part of the world of value. This is what I think of as an 'activist' view of rational agency: our job as rational agents is centrally to create reasons for ourselves and make it true for ourselves that it's rational for us to do one thing rather than another. Our job here on earth is not simply the passive one of obeying the reasons given to us by the world, but to create reasons for ourselves by committing to certain paths over others.

You mentioned once how a world full of only easy choices would "enslave us to reasons". I suppose it is the hard choices that define us. Now, my son's playing a lot of golf at the moment and he was complaining about a golf hole being particularly difficult. And so, I put it to him, "Well, imagine if every single golf hole was the same: flat, no bunkers, no water, short, the greens had no slope. Well, then golf would lose all purpose for you. It's only through the difficulty of each hole that it's interesting for you." I know this is somewhat different, but do you think having hard choices is what defines who we are, giving us purpose and something to move towards in our lives. That is, if

we were to lack these hard choices, then our lives would have less meaning?

So the metaphor with your son and golfing is nice, but one important difference is that what makes a golf course interesting when you've got sand traps and hills and so on, is the physical difficulty of traversing it. The purpose and point of golf is to develop a certain skill. That's why mini-golf tries to be less boring by adding slopes, windmills and loop-de-loops. We can certainly gain purpose in life by developing skills. But hard choices don't make life purposeful by allowing you to develop a skill. Hard choices give life meaning because they are the junctures for the exercise of a very deep freedom we have: the freedom to create a normative truth about ourselves. Here's something amazing you can do without any practice whatsoever: you can quite literally make it true that a career in journalism is better for you than a career in lumberjacking. By committing to journalism, you create a reason for yourself to pursue that career instead of any number of other possible careers that are on a par with it. And that can in turn make it true that you have most reason to be a journalist rather than anything else. So what path you should take in life isn't determined for you by the world. You get to give yourself most reason to pursue one life rather than another through your commitment in hard choices. We are our most free in hard choices. And our commitments in hard choices gives our lives meaning. I made it true that this life is best for me! That's how my life can have meaning even if I'm destitute and living in terrible circumstances.

Now I should say something about this idea of creating reasons, which may seem pretty radical. But it's not; each of us creates reasons all the time without really noticing what

we're doing. We don't only create reasons in hard choices but in easy choices, too. My friend Kate recently had a baby. For her it was an easy choice to have a baby. You can commit to an option that is clearly better than all the others. So Kate committed to have a child, and so she gave herself more reason to have a child than she would have had, had she just decided to have a child in order to go along with her husband's wishes. She's also committed to the flourishing of her child. What does that commitment look like? Well, it's putting her very self behind the well-being of her child so that besides all the reasons the world gives her to care for her child... she has these special commitment-based reasons besides.

Compare her with a deadbeat dad who is totally uncommitted to the welfare of his child. Like Kate, the deadbeat dad has all the reasons given by the world to look after the child – he can be had up for child neglect if he doesn't – but Kate has these further reasons based in her very self.

Commitment is putting your very self behind something. So by committing to something, you change

yourself; you change what's true about you. This is most pronounced in hard choices. For me, the choice of whether to have a biological child was hard. Eventually, I was able to commit to being a sad, miserable, childless cat lady. By committing to not being a biological mother, I did this remarkable thing. I made it true that I had most reason not to get pregnant. Before my commitment, the options were on a par – it was a hard choice. After my commitment, I had most reason to remain child-free.

This power we each have to make it true that we have most reason to do this rather than that in hard choices is what makes hard choices so important in our lives. They are the junctures at which we have the power to make ourselves into one kind of person rather than another.

Some years back I interviewed the philosopher L.A. (Laurie) Paul, I don't know if you've come across her, she writes on change. To me, one of her ideas relates to what you're talking about here when it comes to parents. She talks about transformative experiences – that there are processes that you undergo at cer-

tain points in your life: transformative change. She likened becoming a parent to becoming a vampire. It's not until you are a parent that you understand what it's like to be a parent, just like it's not until you're a vampire that you could understand what it's like to be a vampire. I wonder if by putting yourself behind a choice, a decision, you become transformed and also the thing itself becomes transformed, because you are putting yourself behind it. Am I clutching here or is there some sort of similarity there, in that there's a change that you undergo that you can't understand until after you make that decision?

Laurie's sense of transformative experiences has to do with not being able to understand what something is like. So, there's a specific kind of phenomenological knowledge that we can't have unless we experience it. And I think that's absolutely right. I can't know, at least in very fine-grained detail what it's like to be bitten by a shark, what it's like to drink coffee with mustard in it, what it's like to have a baby, until I actually experience it. So the phenomenon of not knowing exactly what something is like, phenomenologically speaking,

By committing to something, you change yourself; you change what's true about you. This is most pronounced in hard choices.

without having experience of it seems to me ubiquitous. And sometimes experiences we have can change our preferences. That is absolutely right. People who experience trauma will often prefer safety over danger, and sadly many prefer to numb their pain with drugs and alcohol. Laurie helpfully points out that some experiences can change our preferences drastically, and I would add that it's not just those that she calls 'transformative' that can have this effect. It's not just experiences that I have to have that can transform my utility functions; lots of experiences, even those about which I have a pretty darn good idea of what they're like, can change my preferences drastically. I think where our interests go in different directions is that, as I've been arguing for many years, through commitment, we can change not just our preferences but the actual reasons and values in our lives. After all, preference change is relatively simple – hypnotise me or give me a pill and my preferences will change. The story of interest to me is not the mechanistic, causal – and I think Laurie accepts Trichotomy – one of how our preferences change, but the normative one of how our reasons to do things change. Preferences aren't the same as reasons. I might prefer to

eat the whole chocolate cake, but my reasons are: don't do it! And I think the deepest story about how our reasons can change is that we can create reasons through our commitments. But we are both interested in change, Laurie in change in preferences and me in change in the reasons we have to do things.

You say we can put ourselves behind our choices, but how can we, as we're going through life and we develop our own ethics and morality, how can we balance this with what society expects from us when we're making choices? Your parents had some expectations for you, very strong expectations for you when you were younger and you had to get yourself to a point where you felt like you could challenge those expectations. What I'm getting at is this: how do we balance personal values with societal norms and the expectations of others when we're making choices in life?

It's interesting that so many examples of hard choices I've received from people involve just this quandary: the choice is hard because the reasons are on a par, but often there's one option – usually is the safe option – that fits better with everyone's expectations, whether they be moral or otherwise. A

lovely woman from Turkey contacted me a while back, and her issue was that her very Christian Yazidi family was dead set against her marrying her Muslim, Kurdish boyfriend of some 10 years – they were certain that some of his relatives were responsible for the rape, torture, and murder of some of their relatives in Kurdish north of Iraq. It is also part of Yazidi culture to remember the long history of persecution they have endured at the hands of Muslims. But she and her boyfriend loved each other, she wanted to start a family, and her biological clock was ticking. It was him, a child-free life, or adoption, the latter two options with the full support of her family. I take it that this is the kind of case you're asking about: personal reasons to do one thing and societal or familial reasons to do another.

Some people try to minimise this conflict between – let's call it 'morality' and 'prudence' – either by claiming that these are two distinct domains of demands on a person that just can't be reconciled or by distorting one so that it includes the other: if you understand morality properly, you'll see that following its dictates makes your life go best, or if you really understand what your well-being involves, you'll see

Preferences aren't the same as reasons. I might prefer to eat the whole chocolate cake, but my reasons are: don't do it!

that being moral is part of what it is to pursue a life that's best for number 1.

I am pessimistic about these strategies and think that what society demands of us can often conflict with what is in our own best interest. Sometimes we should sacrifice our own interests and do the moral thing – you should ruin your proverbial expensive Italian shoes to save the proverbial person drowning in the pond. Sometimes morality gives way, and we can do what's in our own best interest – while it would certainly be brave of you, you don't have to run into a shopping mall where there is an active shooter to try to save some strangers. I am depressed that that particular example is the one that leapt to mind.

At any rate, understanding hard choices gives us a different way of thinking about the toughest of such conflicts. Sometimes options are on a par and the choice is hard. My lovely Turkish woman faced a hard choice between doing what was best for herself – starting a family with the man she loved even at the cost of being ostracized by her family and community – versus giving up what she knew was best for her and instead fitting in with her familial and community expectations – maybe they weren't entirely 'moral' – maintaining their love and support, and hoping that she would fall in love with someone else in the next year or two when it would still be

safe for her to be pregnant. Once she recognised that she had the normative power to create a reason for herself to go in one direction rather than another, she could turn her attention to the question, 'who can I commit to becoming?'

If she could commit to one option, she could make it best for her. But of course in hard choices like these, people are often not quite ready to commit. In this case, all she could do is drift into one of the options, taking her lumps as they come. Notice that if she could commit to an option, what would have seemed like horrible problems occasioning regret if she had not committed to it, would present themselves as mere challenges to be overcome. Commitment changes the normative landscape.

When you're talking about 'hard choices', I can't help but think of Kierkegaard, who wrote about how, when you make a difficult decision, you'll regret it either way: "Marry or don't marry, you'll regret it," and so on. I just wonder how much regret or perceived future regret plays when we're trying to make these hard choices, when we try to project into one future or the other. How much of a role does regret play when we're faced with hard choices?

This brings us back to where we began: the profound mistake of acting out of fear in hard choices. There's

a related view about decision-making that is similarly wrong-headed: the 'deathbed' approach to decision-making. This is how you should make decisions: pretend you're on your deathbed and ask yourself, "Would I regret making that choice?" If the answer is no, go ahead because you're permitted to choose it. This way of thinking about decision-making is problematic in so many ways, not the least of which is that your future self – the one wasting away in a hospital bed because of cancer – may have very different values and reasons from your present self. But the main thing wrong with the deathbed approach is that it assumes that a rational agent's life is linear in its trajectory – that it's never rational to change directions and grow as a person even if that means sometimes you take the worse option. I think that's a profound mistake and a terrible way to live.

In hard choices, if we default to taking the least risky option, we overlook the normative power we have to create reasons for ourselves and to make true that we have most reason to be, say, journalists rather than lumberjacks. We miss out on what is to my mind one of the most remarkable facts about the human condition: that we have the capacity to make ourselves into creatures who have most reason to do this rather than that and thereby write the stories of our lives. ■















Photo: Tim Mossholder

by Marina Benjamin

The gendering of choice

Whatever my grievances with feminism and its frequent failures to fully comprehend the conditional nature of choice for women, my complaint comes from a place of rare cultural privilege. I live in a (reasonably) enlightened western democracy. I've had unlimited access to education and public life; ample opportunity to call out everyday sexism as well as the systemic injustice of the gender pay gap and glass ceiling; I have full control of my body and reproductive rights and of how and where I live. Daily I make sovereign decisions both large and small.

On the other side of the globe, Afghanistan's Taliban regime has tightened its grip over women's lives. Women are already barred from a host of everyday activities most people take for granted: they cannot work, study beyond sixth grade, travel, go the gym or the park, occupy the front seat of a car, look at a man who is not family, or appear in public without being veiled from head to toe. As Meryl Streep famously quipped earlier this year, a female cat has more rights than a woman in Afghanistan. Since then, new rulings ban women from singing, praying audibly, and talking to one another outside the home. In choosing to flout these rules, a woman risks imprisonment. Stepping up op-

position to this 'gender apartheid', the UN notes rising suicide attempts among women living under Taliban rule – one Uzbek woman from Takhar fearing the regime would soon ban women "from breathing without a man's permission".

The remarkable thing is that a handful of Afghan women still choose a path of resistance, even knowing the deadly consequences that will come with exposure. Under cloak and dagger, they attempt to get their stories heard and acquaint the west with the realities of their ongoing oppression. I have the honour of working with three such women, through a charity dedicated to surfacing the voices of persecuted people, and alongside a valiant translator acting as go-between for the women whose writing I'm editing. In doing this work I'm reminded, powerfully, that refusal is itself a choice, if one of last resort; and that, whatever the risks, elective non-compliance is fundamentally a survival strategy.

In the gentler world that I inhabit, women are ostensibly free to choose how to live their lives. But I sometimes wonder how free those choices really are. When I was politicised as a feminist at university in the 1980s, I acquired a lexicon of opposition that allowed me to articulate why I'd never choose the life my mother lived, under the shadow of a succession

of men: her father (the patriarch); her brother (the beneficiary of the university education she'd foregone as a migrant); and her husband (to whom she subjugated her autonomy). If her life seems desperately old-fashioned for a woman in the second half of the 20th century, it's largely because she observed cultural mores from her native Iraq – mores that western feminists at the time would have had no qualms rejecting. And yet how much choice did those feminists really have?

In hindsight, it looks as though that thorny philosophical distinction between freedom 'from' and freedom 'to' tied second-wave feminists in knots. Briefly, they seemed to have achieved both kinds of freedom – breaking with the shackles of convention that kept women in their place, while striding forth into the world with the kind of ambition and drive men once claimed for themselves. But it didn't last. Those pioneering feminists who were my icons and role models, Gloria Steinem, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Susan Brownmiller, could not escape the various forces of social coercion that eroded and undermined their life choices.

There was the pressure exerted by separatist factions within the feminist movement, for example, whose members shamed those women who continued to have relationships with men. Or the so-called freedom the contraceptive pill offered women in severing pleasure from the demands of reproduction.

As numerous commentators have noted over the years, the advent of the pill primarily served the interests of men, who no longer had the fear of getting women pregnant, while women continued to face the stubbornly enduring stigma of being labelled 'loose', along with all that implied about a person's moral worth. Women who sought the same freedoms as

men were effectively demonised by other means.

In 1977, Shirley Conran published her landmark polemic *Superwoman*, with its rallying cry that women could have it all, enjoying a public life and career while still running a household (thanks to her clever household management hacks). For a time, women believed that with a bit of deft plate-spinning it might just work. Until the American sociologist Arlie Hochschild called out the lie. Her ground-breaking study *The Second Shift* contains dozens of interviews with women who were working themselves into the ground, returning home from demanding jobs to perform a host of household duties. More, after seeing to the cooking, cleaning and childcare, they had to be available to their partners as well.

It turned out that most women couldn't have it all, but instead had to choose between having a career or a family. Sad to say, many women became casualties of this false dichotomy, reluctantly sacrificing motherhood in order to pursue a professional career. Even now, young women worry that in choosing to have children before their professional lives are fully launched, they will be prevented from competing on an equal footing with their male peers, or discriminated against and overlooked for promotion.

Perhaps it is in the nature of choice that moving in one self-actualising direction shuts down a whole range of choiceful options – each a potential other life. Then again, perhaps it's more telling to look at who gains from the choices women make.

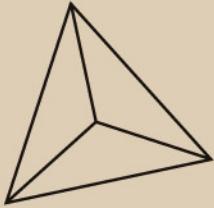
When women cover up as a means to free themselves from the unwelcome scrutiny of the male gaze – something most western feminists have not yet managed to escape – they simultaneously end up bolstering a system that demands women cover up in order

It turned out that most women couldn't have it all, but instead had to choose between having a career or a family.

not to present a temptation to men. Similarly, who gains from the western #TradWife movement, in which women defend their choice to be stay-at-home mums, leaving men free to have it all?

This sense that women cannot win, whatever choices they make, finds extreme expression in Marleen Gorris's controversial film *A Question of Silence*, in which three women who had never met spontaneously kill a boutique owner after he stops one of the women attempting to shoplift a dress.

Made at the height of second-wave feminism, the film is a dark parable about choice and its lack. It aims to align viewers with the character of the criminal psychiatrist assigned to the case who comes to understand the women's action as a reasonable response to the endless travails of living under patriarchy. A modern-day fable, it literalises the murderous fury we engender in those we constrain. Deprive women of choice, it says, and you'll have their rage to contend with. ■

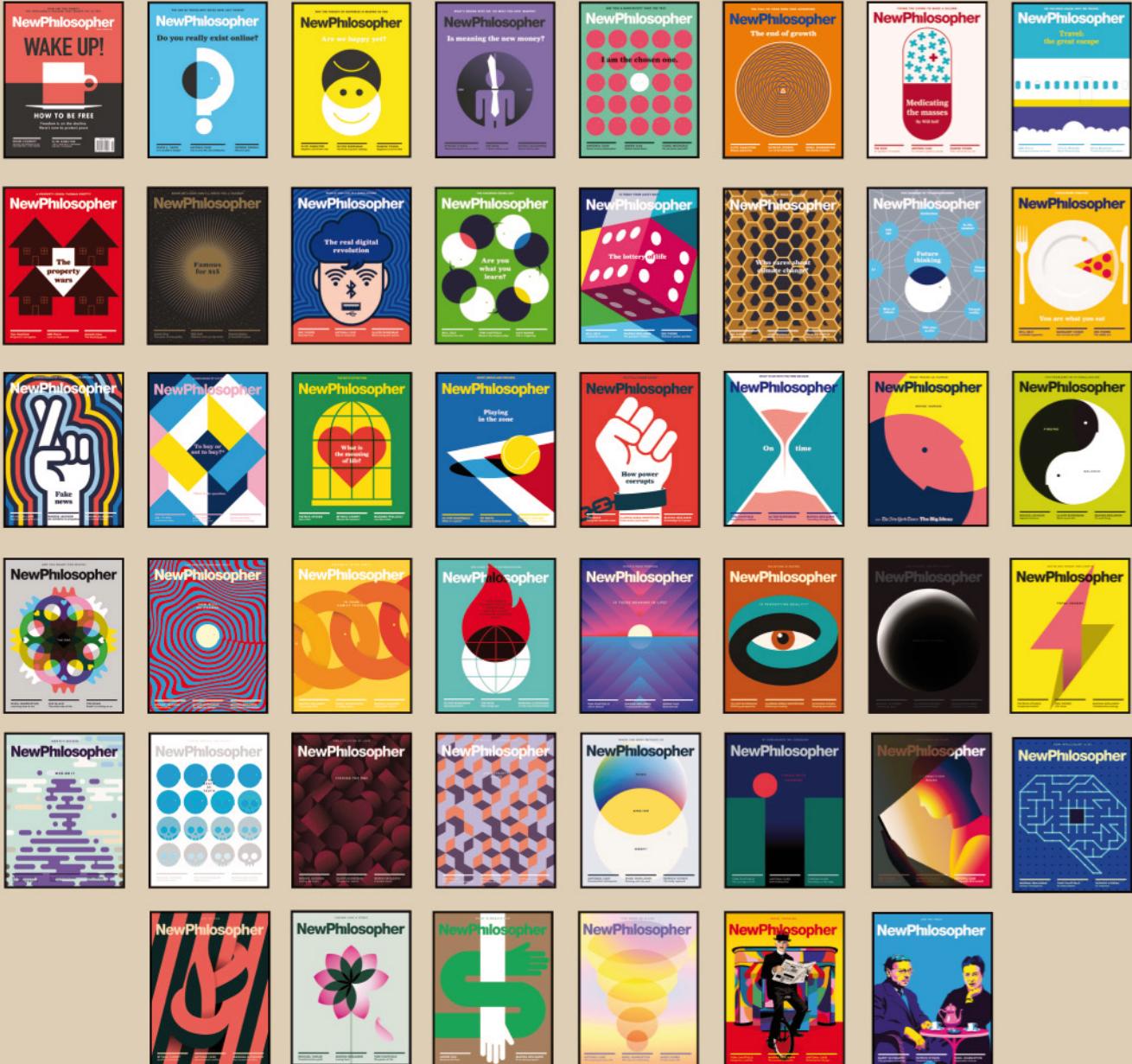
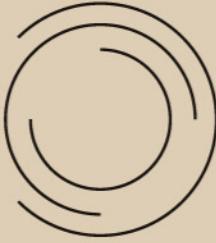


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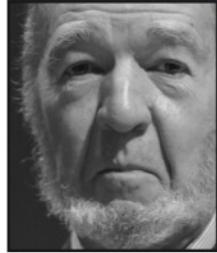


Choice

The Historian

Jared Diamond
1937–present

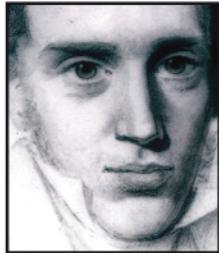
Crucial knowledge



The Existentialist

Søren Kierkegaard
1813–1855

A single moment



The Novelist

Jean-Paul Sartre
1905–1980

His own self



Early states had a hereditary leader with a title equivalent to king, like a super paramount chief and exercising an even greater monopoly of information, decision making, and power. Even in democracies today, crucial knowledge is available to only a few individuals, who control the flow of information to the rest of the government and consequently control decisions. For instance, in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, information and discussions that determined whether nuclear war would engulf half a billion people were initially confined by President Kennedy to a ten-member executive committee of the National Security Council that he himself appointed; then he limited final decisions to a four-member group consisting of himself and three of his cabinet ministers.

Imagine a captain of a ship the moment a shift of direction must be made; then he may be able to say: I can do either this or that. But if he is not a mediocre captain he will also be aware that during all this the ship is ploughing ahead with its ordinary velocity, and thus there is but a single moment when it is inconsequential whether he does this or does that. So also with a person—if he forgets to take into account the velocity—there eventually comes a moment where it is no longer a matter of an Either/Or, not because he has chosen, but because he has refrained from it, which also can be expressed by saying: Because others have chosen for him—or because he has lost himself.

And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. When we say that man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that that in making this choice he also chooses all men. In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all.

What is choice? How do we make up our minds? Here are six eminent thinkers' views on choice and decision-making.

The Theorist

Simone de Beauvoir
1908–1986

The absurd



The Scientist

John Bell
1928–1990

Determinism



The Philosopher

Daniel Dennett
1942–2024

Free will



From the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity. It was by affirming the irreducible character of ambiguity that Kierkegaard opposed himself to Hegel, and it is by ambiguity that, in our own generation, Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, fundamentally defined man, that being whose being is not to be, that subjectivity which realises itself only as a presence in the world, that engaged freedom, that surging of the for-oneself which is immediately given for others. But it is also claimed that existentialism is a philosophy of the absurd and of despair. It encloses man in a sterile anguish, in an empty subjectivity. It is incapable of furnishing him with any principle for making choices. Let him do as he pleases. In any case, the game is lost.

There is a way to escape the inference of superluminal speeds and spooky action at a distance. But it involves absolute determinism in the universe, the complete absence of free will. Suppose the world is super-deterministic, with not just inanimate nature running on behind-the-scenes clockwork, but with our behaviour, including our belief that we are free to choose to do one experiment rather than another, absolutely predetermined, including the 'decision' by the experimenter to carry out one set of measurements rather than another, the difficulty disappears. There is no need for a faster-than-light signal to tell particle A what measurement has been carried out on particle B, because the universe, including particle A, already 'knows' what that measurement, and its outcome, will be.

The distinction between responsible moral agents and beings with diminished or no responsibility is coherent, real, and important. It is coherent, even if in many instances it is hard to apply; it draws an empirically real line, in that we don't all fall on one side; and, most important, the distinction matters: the use we make of it plays a crucial role in the quality and meaning of our lives. ... We want to hold ourselves and others responsible, but we recognise that our intuitions often support the judgement that a particular individual has "diminished responsibility" because of his or her infirmities, or because of particularly dire circumstances upon upbringing or at the time of action.



by André Dao

The big life choice

A few months before the end of term at high school, I went to see a careers counsellor. The following year I would be in Year 11, and I had a choice to make – the subjects I selected for my last two years of high school would determine which university courses I could get into. And that, in turn, would determine the jobs I could get after graduation. In other words, it felt as if I was choosing the future direction of my life.

In the counsellor's office we looked at my marks, a short questionnaire I had filled out about my interests, and

the results of an 'aptitude' test which purported to be able to tell what sorts of career paths a fifteen-year-old should pursue. These three data sources rather neatly represent three distinct ways I could approach this Big Life Choice: I could decide based on past performance – i.e. what subjects had I done well in before? Or I could decide based on what I, subjectively, wanted – what sorts of things was I interested in? Finally, I could decide based on what this apparently objective test said I was 'suited' to in terms of innate skills and temperament.

In the end, I made my decision by relying on a mix of all three data sources – I chose subjects that seemed to fit with who I was, and that was informed by past experience, conscious will, and intrinsic attributes. Luckily, all three sources tended to converge on the humanities, and away from the sciences – and so I made the fateful choice to drop chemistry and mathematics. I would not, as much as my parents would have liked me to, be going on to medical school.

How much did that choice matter? It was certainly consequential – I closed

the door on any number of careers that require scientific and mathematical knowledge. But is that really true? The counsellor was at pains to assure me that my generation could expect to change careers five or six times over our working lives. So as monumental as the choice felt, it wasn't actually the end of the matter. In the twenty years since, nothing concrete has stopped me from re-training – from opening one of those closed doors.

I say nothing concrete because my teenage choice did matter in another way. Loading up on subjects like literature and history didn't just determine which university courses were open to me in the future. The choice also shaped me in the present – I started to identify as a humanities person, as a 'not maths person'. That identification was only sharpened by having Vietnamese parents; I was the Vietnamese-looking student into literature, not physics.

So while nothing and no one has prevented me from going back to school to become a pharmacist or an accountant, to do so would have involved contradicting this narrative about myself – a narrative that increasingly defined me as an individual.

So, in a certain sense, my choice did matter – if it wasn't for that decision, my life would now look different. But how different? My choice mattered – but how much did it matter? To put it another way, we could ask: in what way was my choice a choice?

The opposite of choosing is necessity; if it was absolutely necessary that I do something, then evidently I did not choose it. As Hannah Arendt explains, this insight formed a cornerstone of Ancient Greek philosophy. For the ancients, none of what we would today call private activity involved free choice. Whether one was labouring in the field, managing a business, or running a household, such activities were directed at ensuring the necessities of life. Any choices made in the course of these activities – no matter how consequential – were therefore determined by biological necessity.

Genuine choice, then, had to take place in a realm undetermined by biology. The ancients' name for this sphere of free choice was 'the public'. As Arendt argues, the public realm in the ancient city-state was the space where (the very few) citizens came together as equals, to partake in the only truly free activity – truly free because it was

entirely disconnected from the needs of 'sheer survival'; namely, politics.

The life of the citizen was the 'good life', writes Arendt, not only because it was better or more carefree than ordinary life, but because "by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labour and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process". Politics, in this account, is a world away from the periodic elections and party systems we think of today as political. In this deeper understanding of political action, politics is "never for the sake of life", but for glory – both individual and communal. That is, political action, for the ancients and for Arendt, produced the polis or the city-state – something in common, and something that lasts beyond the human lifespan. Choosing to do politics, in this sense, is an opportunity to do something that really matters because it is freely chosen. The citizen could just as easily stay home and enjoy his (and it was always his) comforts. In short, political action is a way to transcend our animality, and to be truly and fully human.

Of course, when Arendt says the ancients "mastered the necessities of

So while nothing and no one has prevented me from going back to school to become a pharmacist, or an accountant, to do so would have involved contradicting this narrative about myself – a narrative that increasingly defined me as an individual.

Far from being free to choose to transcend the necessities of life, the ‘socialised’ human drawn from the philosophy of Adam Smith makes choices only with regard to their self-interest.

sheer life”, she means that they did so through the very deliberate exclusion of the vast majority of people living in the city from this exalted public realm: women, slaves, and foreigners. Citizens were free to choose to do politics because the excluded looked after the necessities for them.

Such a system only worked – to the extent that a system built on slavery and exclusion could be said to ‘work’ – on a small scale. Arendt was explicit about this: as the population of citizens grows larger, the sphere for politics – with its emphasis on speech and action – is replaced by the social sphere. In the social, ‘behaviour’ rather than action reigns supreme. Rather than the free choice of politics, society expects its members to be ‘normalised’. With the rise of the social came the rise of statistics about social behaviour – and out of the myriad choices being made every day, the ‘laws’ of large numbers began to emerge.

The idea of political economy as a science developed from this replacement of the political by the social. Far from being free to choose to transcend the necessities of life, the ‘socialised’ human, drawn from the philosophy of Adam Smith, makes choices only with regard to their self-interest. So-called rational choice theory, which purports to predict the behaviour of society’s members, flattens human agency until it becomes mechanical. The Ancient Greeks would not recognise our rational choices as choices at all.

Looking back to high school, my Big Life Choice now takes on a different quality. Could I have chosen not to choose? Whether I chose literature or mathematics – or dropped out of school altogether – there was no getting away from the fact that any decisions about my ‘future’ really meant making a decision about my ‘career’. As Arendt would have put it, I had little choice but to accept my place in a society of jobholders, not a *polis* of active citizens. ■



“This is a displacement activity to put off proper procrastinating.”





Which one shall I take?

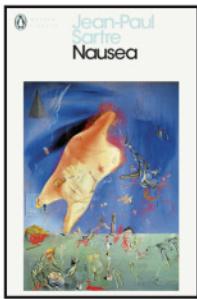
To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
Each jealous of the other, as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? one? or neither? Neither can be enjoy'd
If both remain alive: to take the widow
Exasperates, makes mad her sister Goneril;
And hardly shall I carry out my side,
Her husband being alive. Now then, we'll use
His countenance for the battle; which being done
Let her who would be rid of him devise
His speedy taking off. As for the mercy
Which he intends to Lear, and to Cordelia,
The battle done, and they within our power,
Shall never see his pardon; for my state
Stands on me to defend, not to debate.

By William Shakespeare, from *King Lear*



Our library

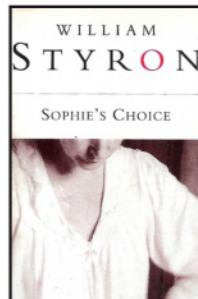
Nausea



Jean-Paul Sartre
Lost in mist

The beginnings would have had to be real beginnings. Alas! Now I see so clearly what I wanted. Real beginnings are like a fanfare of trumpets, like the first notes of a jazz tune, cutting short tedium, making for continuity: then you say about these evenings within evenings: "I was out for a walk, it was an evening in May." You walk, the moon has just risen, you feel lazy, vacant, a little empty. And then suddenly you think: "Something has happened." No matter what: a slight rustling in the shadow, a thin silhouette crossing the street. But this paltry event is not like the others: suddenly you see that it is the beginning of a great shape whose outlines are lost in mist and you tell yourself, "Something is beginning."

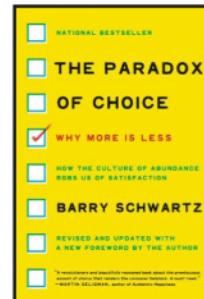
Sophie's Choice



William Styron
Bundle of parchment

More rain outside, a torrent. Now the odour of vomit, pervasive, unextinguishable, cheesy. Fellow passengers: two frightened convent girls of sixteen or so, sobbing, sleeping, waking to murmur prayers to the Holy Virgin; Wiktor, a black-haired, intense, infuriated young Home Army member already plotting revolt or escape, ceaselessly scribbling messages on slips of paper to be passed to Wanda in another compartment; a fear-maddened shrivelled old lady claiming to be the niece of Wieniawski, claiming the bundle of parchment she kept pressed close to her to be the original manuscript of his famous Polonaise, claiming some kind of immunity, dissolving into tears like the school girls.

The Paradox of Choice

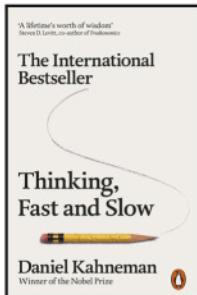


Barry Schwartz
As people adapt

Twenty-five years ago, economist Tibor Scitovsky explored some of the consequences of the phenomenon of adaptation in his book *The Joyless Economy*. Human beings, Scitovsky said, want to experience pleasure. And when they consume, they do experience pleasure – as long as the things they consume are novel. But as people adapt – as the novelty wears off – pleasure comes to be replaced by comfort. It's a thrill to drive your new car for the first few weeks; after that, it's just comfortable. It certainly beats the old car, but it isn't much of a kick. Comfort is nice enough, but people want pleasure. And comfort isn't pleasure..

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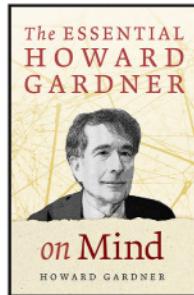
Thinking, Fast and Slow



Daniel Kahnemann
Choices of others

Every author, I suppose, has in mind a setting in which readers of his or her work could benefit from having read it. Mine is the proverbial office watercooler, where opinions are shared and gossip is exchanged. I hope to enrich the vocabulary that people use when they talk about the judgements and choices of others, the company's new policies, or a colleague's investment decisions. Why be concerned with gossip? Because it is much easier, as well as far more enjoyable, to identify and label the mistakes of others than to recognise our own. Questioning what we believe and want is difficult at the best of times, and especially difficult when we most need to do it, but we can benefit from the informed opinions of others.

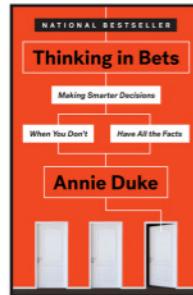
The Essential Howard Gardner on Mind



Howard Gardner
Mature comprehension

Two tasks were used to assess children's capacities to interpret metaphoric statements. Subjects ranging in age from 6 to 14 years were required either to explain a metaphoric sentence or to select one of four possible paraphrases. There was a developmental trend toward appropriate apprehension of metaphor. Several steps preceding mature comprehension were described: metonymic and primitive-metaphoric interpretations were frequent prior to the age of 10, and the youngest children sometimes interpreted metaphors as descriptions of magical situations. In general, cross-sensory metaphors proved easier to comprehend than psychological-physical metaphors.

Thinking in Bets



Annie Duke
Quality of decisions

Why are we so bad at separating luck and skill? Why are we so uncomfortable knowing that results can be beyond our control? Why do we create such a strong connection between results and the quality of the decisions preceding them? How can we avoid falling into the trap of the Monday Morning Quarterback, whether it is in analysing someone else's decision or in making and reviewing the decisions in our own lives? Take a moment to imagine your best decision in the last year. Now take a moment to imagine your worst decision. I'm willing to bet that your best decision preceded a good result and the worst decision preceded a bad result.





Buridan's ass

"Should two courses be judged equal, then the will cannot break the deadlock, all it can do is to suspend judgement until the circumstances change, and the right course of action is clear."

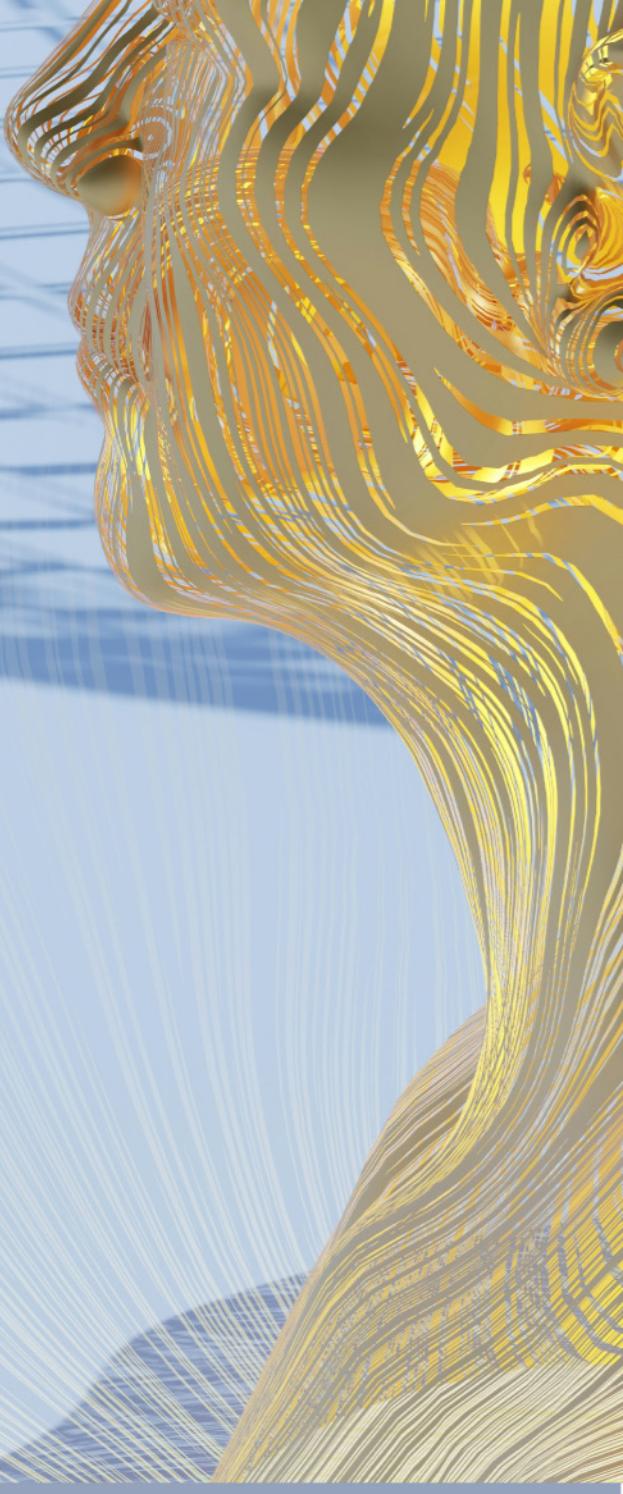
—Jean Buridan, c. 1340

It may be objected, if man does not act from free will, what will happen if the incentives to action are equally balanced, as in the case of Buridan's ass? I am quite ready to admit, that a man placed in the equilibrium described (namely, as perceiving nothing but hunger and thirst, a certain food and a certain drink, each equally distant from him) would die of hunger and thirst. If I am asked, whether such a one should not rather be considered an ass than a man; I answer, that I do not know, neither do I know how a man should be considered, who hangs himself, or how we should consider children, fools, madmen, et cetera. ▀

—Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics, book 2, proposition 49, scholium*



Baruch Spinoza



Artwork: Anastasiia Ornarin

Who owns intelligence?

By Howard Gardner, Shinri Furuzawa,
and Annie Stachura

When it comes to using our explicit intellectual endowment to solve problems, one aspect of human exceptionality was long assumed to be our use of tools. Since the 1960s, however, we have recognised that many other species both create and use tools to solve problems. Jane Goodall famously observed chimpanzees using sticks to “fish,” stripping the leaves and sticking them into termite mounds to extract and eat the termites. Other examples include bottlenose dolphins using marine sponges to protect their rostrums (beaks) while foraging the seabed and using empty shells to trap fish. Octopuses carry coconut shells as portable shelters to protect from predators and stack rocks as barriers for additional protection. Using and creating tools to find innovative solu-

tions to problems that are of value to the species may even be considered a form of animal creativity.

Some species also exhibit problem-solving skills that involve using both prior learned knowledge and future inference. For example, crows place nuts on roads and wait for cars to drive over them. In urban environments, raccoons learn to open locks, garbage cans, garage doors, and windows, persistently working on a problem for hours and returning to it.

The problem-solving skills of various species have also been demonstrated in the lab. The ability of rats to solve mazes is well known. Octopuses can also navigate mazes by learning and remembering routes. Exhibiting long-term memory, they recall solutions to puzzles when faced

subsequently with similar challenges – they can even open childproof jars containing food and have been known to escape their tanks. Through observation and imitation of conspecifics, octopuses display social learning. Corvids can solve problems and puzzles with up to eight steps.

Some animals solve problems using arithmetic and estimation of quantity. Bees, for example, count landmarks to mark distance to navigate routes to food sources (note: many known human languages don’t count above four). Guppy fish and angelfish distinguish between group sizes, choosing larger groups for better chances of survival. In the lab, chimpanzees have demonstrated better short-term memory than humans for numbers. Numerical competence

demonstrates once again that certain proposed intelligences are not unique to humans.

Cultural transmission

Animals also display a form of intelligence through their ability to share and teach acquired knowledge across generations, a form of cognition also previously thought to be unique to humans. Bottlenose dolphin mothers, for example, teach their young how to use sponges when foraging, a skill primarily passed from mother to daughter. Matriarchs in elephant herds take charge of guiding and teaching young elephants migration routes, as well as navigation and survival skills. Chimpanzees have been observed teaching their offspring which specific plants have medicinal properties and how to use them. Mothers guide their young to foraging sites and demonstrate how to use the plants – for example by chewing first or swallowing whole to help expel intestinal parasites. Crows share knowledge gained about specific “threatening humans,” which enhances the survival of the group.

Communication

When it comes to communication (such as that exhibited in this

article!), as far as we are aware, other animals do not exhibit nuanced or abstract forms of thought. We don't know whether animals communicate about past or future events. Though they may transmit messages on a simple level, their communication appears to lack the grammatical complexity or depth of human language.

And yet, in some ways, animal communication resembles human language. Just as humans have distinct societies with different languages, orca groups have different “dialects;” variance across groups suggests distinct “group cultures.” Some bird species – like songbirds and parrots – exhibit syntactic intention as they arrange sounds to convey different meanings as in human language. Japanese tits, for example, can use an “ABC” call sequence as a predator alert, which when adding “D” may indicate the type of threat. Primates also have a rich vocal repertoire used to communicate, for example, about food, danger, or play. The neural mechanisms that enable vocal production are similar to those found in humans and may illuminate the evolutionary origins of human speech.

Scientists are only beginning to discover sophisticated communication within certain species – it may be

far more complex than observers had once thought. It appears that some species use forms of communication – such as vibrations, chemical signals, or sign language – that prove difficult for humans to discern or perceive. For example, dolphins do not just “hear” sound; they “feel” sound through their tissue and surrounding water. This richer experience – both tactile and acoustic – may well convey nuanced information. Sperm whales use click vocalisation to communicate complex ideas – such as information on the location of feeding grounds, migration routes, or approaching dangers – and perhaps even to share emotions. They use nasal passages and a large fatty organ in their foreheads (the melon) to amplify and direct large sounds over long distances. The Cetacean Translation Initiative is currently using AI to decode sperm whale clicks – much more complex than previously realised. The speed and timing of clicks correspond to human vowel duration and pitch, and the timbre and harmonics of clicks correspond to human resonant frequencies during singing and talking.

Elephants also have a highly rich communication system. We now know this involves not only vocalisations, body language, touch, chemical

It appears that some species use forms of communication – such as vibrations, chemical signals, or sign language – that prove difficult for humans to discern or perceive. For example, dolphins do not just “hear” sound; they “feel” sound through their tissue and surrounding water.

cues through pheromones and gland secretions, seismic signals produced by foot stamping and other movements – but also infrasound. Low frequency infrasound waves produced in the larynx and modulated through the vocal tract and skull can travel several miles through the air and even greater distances underground. Infrasound is sensed through specialised cells in the feet as well as through the ears and other parts of the body.

Some animal species have been taught to communicate successfully with humans as demonstrated by Koko the gorilla trained by Francine Patterson. Koko learned over 1000 signs in American Sign Language (ASL) and could be said to “understand” English. Washoe the chimpanzee, taught by Allen and Beatrix Gardner, also used ASL and could form simple sentences. Irene Pepperberg trained an African grey parrot named Alex who could name over 100 objects and use phrases and sentences. Alex demonstrated advanced cognitive skills thought to exist previously in only primates and humans. Other species taught to communicate with humans include crows and ravens, dolphins, elephants, sea lions, and dogs.

Complex social behaviour

Researchers are not only learning to decode the communication systems of diverse species, but they are also beginning to uncover social behaviours that are more complex than previously assumed. Sceptics of animal cognition have argued that attributing complex social behaviours to animals is anthropomorphising – projecting human motivations onto other species and overinterpreting their behaviour.

We now know, however, that chimpanzees are capable of perspective taking, or understanding the goals and intentions of others

– distinguishing whether another chimpanzee is unwilling or unable to cooperate. Scrub jays practice deception – they “know” when another scrub jay is trying to steal their cache of food and will “pretend” to hide it in one place while actually hiding it elsewhere; or they “feign” indifference when discovering food so as not to attract attention and return to it later when the coast is clear. Elephants display empathy, another form of perspective taking; they offer comfort to other elephants who are grieving or assist others in difficulty. Such behaviours require the ability to recognise mental states in others and understand their intentions.

Perception

One of the challenges in understanding animal cognition is that many species perceive the world in ways fundamentally different from those exhibited by humans. Some have electroreception, such as glass knifefish that use distortions in electric fields to navigate and hunt. Honeybees see a much wider UV spectrum perceiving ultraviolet light and snakes can perceive infrared radiation. Some birds, fish, and reptiles have trichromatic vision – they can see additional colour channels beyond the red, green and blue perceivable by humans. Other animals, such as bats and dolphins, can perceive high-frequency ultrasound, while some, such as elephants and whales, perceive low-frequency infrasound. Bats use echolocation calls beyond the range of human auditory perception. Integrated visual and auditory systems process returning calls to map the environment in considerable detail, allowing bats to navigate and hunt in the dark.

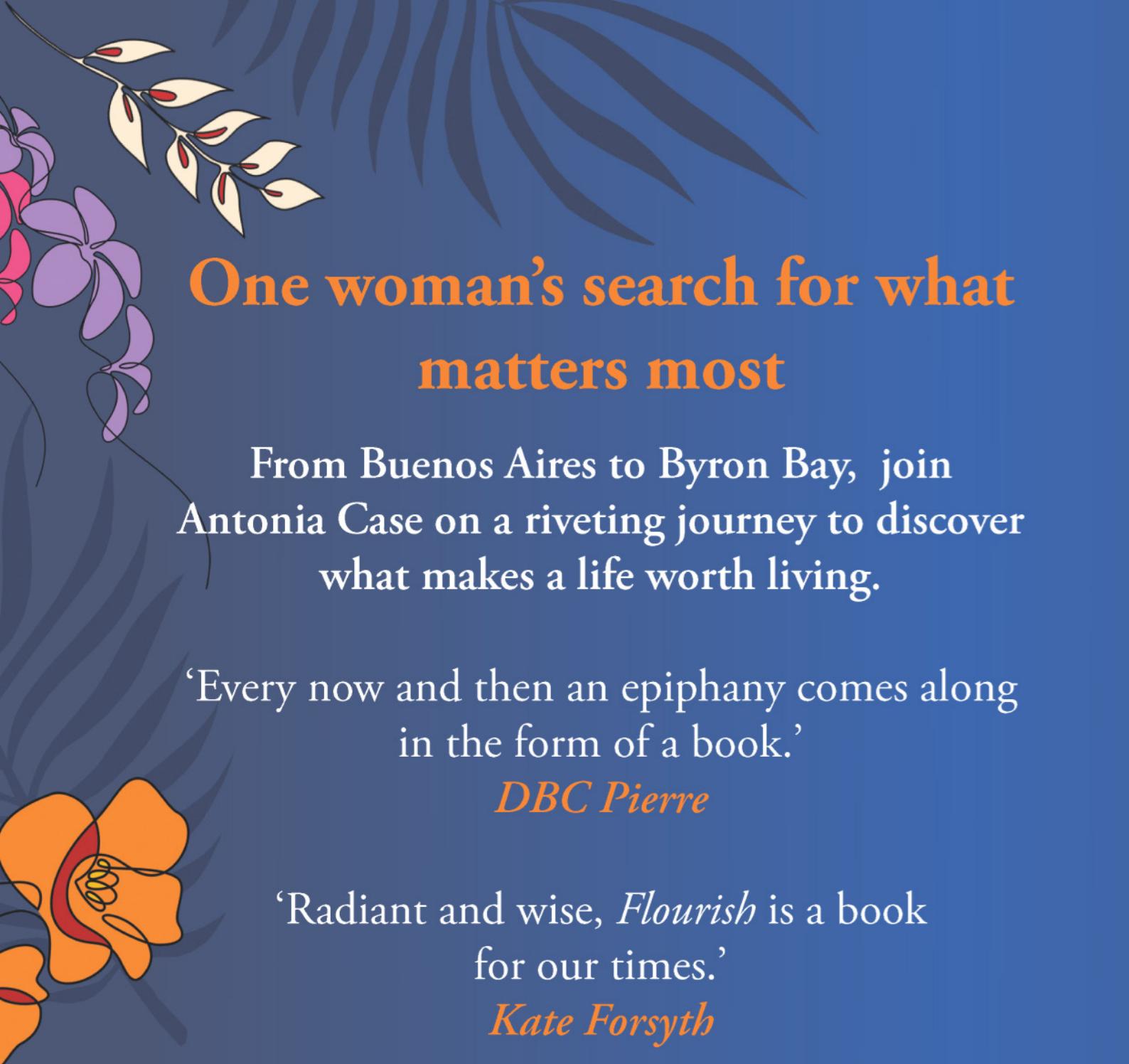
Migratory species, such as Arctic terns and monarch butterflies, are able to sense magnetic fields and use cues from the sun, stars, and polarised

light to navigate many thousands of miles. Sea turtles are able to detect the distinct magnetic signatures of different beaches; they use such cues to cross oceans navigating back to beaches where they were born to lay eggs, possibly also aided by olfactory cues.

Dogs may well deserve their own paragraph! They have an ability to use olfactory senses to map a rich awareness of their environments, not just of the present but through lingering scent trails – of the past. Dogs also exhibit both inter-species and intra-species differences, with variations in performance according to factors such as breed, training, motivation, health, and temperament. As an example: bloodhounds have an extremely large array of olfactory receptors (possessing around 300 million) which enhances their olfactory abilities (humans possess a mere 5-6 million) – along with a very good working memory. In contrast, companion dogs have poorer working memory but are adept at interpreting social signals from their owners.

The diverse perceptions of the world by different species demonstrate the complexity of animal cognition and range of adaptations that allow thriving in different environments. Other animal species experience the world in different ways to humans and process information in ways we are unable to appreciate without technological assistance. ▀

From the article Who Owns Intelligence? Reflections After a Quarter Century, reprinted with permission from Howard Gardner, Shinri Furuwawa, Annie Stachura



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By Søren Kierkegaard

Extracts from Either/Or

Either/or

Dear Reader: I wonder if you may not sometimes have felt inclined to doubt a little the correctness of the familiar philosophic maxim that the external is the internal and the internal the external.

For my part I have always been heretically-minded on this point in philosophy, and have therefore early accustomed myself, as far as possible, to institute observations and inquiries concerning it. I have sought guidance from those authors whose views I shared on this matter; in short, I have done everything in my power to remedy the deficiency in

the philosophical works. Gradually the sense of hearing came to be my favourite sense; for just as the voice is the revelation of the inwardness incommensurable with the outer, so the ear is the instrument by which this inwardness is apprehended, hearing found a contradiction between what I saw and what I heard, then I found my doubt confirmed, and my enthusiasm for the investigation stimulated."

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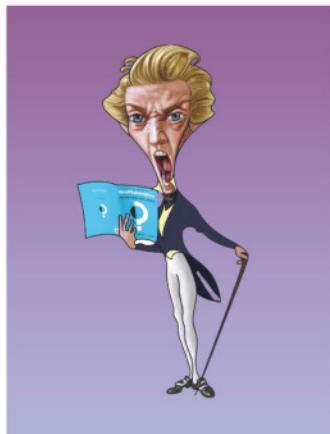
What is a poet? An unhappy man who conceals profound anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so fashioned that when sighs and groans pass over them they sound like beautiful music. People flock about the poet and say to him: do sing again; Which means, would that new sufferings tormented your soul, and: would that your lips stayed fashioned as before, for your cries would only terrify us, but your music is delightful. And the critics join them, saying: well done, thus must it be according to the laws of aesthetics. Why, to be sure, a critic resembles a poet as one pea another,

the only difference being that he has no anguish in his heart and no music on his lips. Behold, therefore would I rather be a swineherd on Amager, and be understood by the swine than a poet, and misunderstood by men.

○ ○ ○

Marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way.^{!°} Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it either way. Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will also regret it. Trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Whether you trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang

yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life. It is not merely in isolated moments that I, as Spinoza says, view everything *aeterno modo*



modo [in the mode of eternity]," but I am continually *aeterno modo*. Many believe they, too, are this when after doing one thing or another they unite or mediate these opposites. But this is a misunderstanding, for the true eternity does not lie behind either/or but

before it. Their eternity will therefore also be a painful temporal sequence, since they will have a double regret on which to live. My wisdom is easy to grasp, for I have only one maxim, and even that is not a point of departure for me. One must differentiate between the subsequent dialectic in either/or and the eternal one suggested here. So when I say that my maxim is not a point of departure for me, this does not have the opposite of being a point of departure but is merely the negative expression of my maxim, that by which it comprehends itself in contrast to being a point of departure or not being a point of departure. My maxim is not a point of departure for me, because if I made it a point of departure, I would regret it, and if I did not make it a point of departure, I would also regret it. If one or another of my esteemed listeners thinks there is anything to what I have said, he merely demonstrates that he has no head for philosophy. If he thinks there is any movement in what has been said, this demonstrates the same thing. But for those listeners who are able to follow me, al- though I do not move, I shall now

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elucidate the eternal truth by which this philosophy is self-contained and does not concede anything higher. That is, if I made my maxim a point of departure, then I would be unable to stop, for if I did not stop, I would regret it, and if I did stop, I would also regret it, etc. But if I never start, then I can always stop, for my eternal starting is my eternal stopping. Experience shows that it is not at all difficult for philosophy to begin. Far from it. It begins, in fact, with nothing!" and therefore can always begin. But it is always difficult for philosophy and philosophers to stop. This difficulty, too, I have avoided, for if anyone thinks that I, in stopping now, actually stop, he demonstrates that he does not have speculative comprehension. The point is that I do not stop now, but I stopped when I began. My philosophy, therefore, has the advantageous characteristic of being brief and of being irrefutable, for if anyone disputes me, I daresay I have the right to declare him mad. The philosopher, then, is continually *aeterno modo* and does not have, as did the blessed Sintenis, only specific hours that are lived for eternity.

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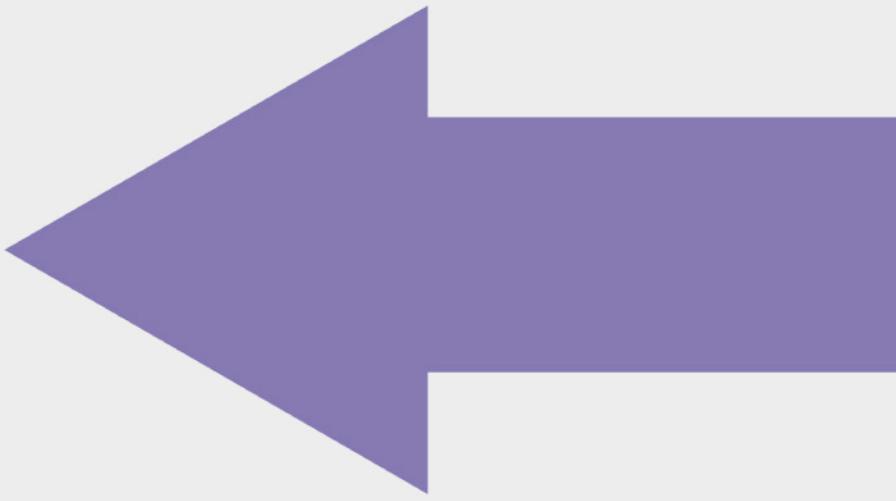
love is free and that precisely this genius constitutes its greatness.

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How often do we have an urge to go beyond the historical consciousness, a longing, a homesickness for the primeval forest that lies behind us, and does not this longing acquire a double significance when it joins to itself the conception of another being whose home is also in that region? Therefore, every marriage, even one that is entered into after sober consideration, has an urge, at least in particular moments, to imagine such a foreground. And how beautiful it is that the God who is spirit also loves the earthly love. That there is much lying among married people on this score, I readily admit to you, and that your observations along this line have frequently amused me, but the truth in it ought not to be forgotten. Perhaps someone thinks it is better to have complete authority in the choice of "one's life-partner," but such an expression as that betrays an extreme narrowness of mind and foolish self-importance of understanding and has no intimation that in its genius romantic

A strange thing happened to me in my dream. I was rapt into the Seventh Heaven. There sat all the gods assembled. As a special dispensation I was granted the favour to have one wish. "Do you wish for youth," said Mercury, "or for beauty, or power, or a long life; or do you wish for the most beautiful woman, or any other of the many fine things we have in our treasure trove? Choose, but only one thing!" For a moment I was at a loss. Then I addressed the gods in this wise: "Most honourable contemporaries, I choose one thing – that I may always have the laughs on my side." Not one god made answer, but all began to laugh. From this I concluded that my wish had been granted and thought that the gods knew how to express themselves with good taste: for it would surely have been inappropriate to answer gravely: your wish has been granted. ■

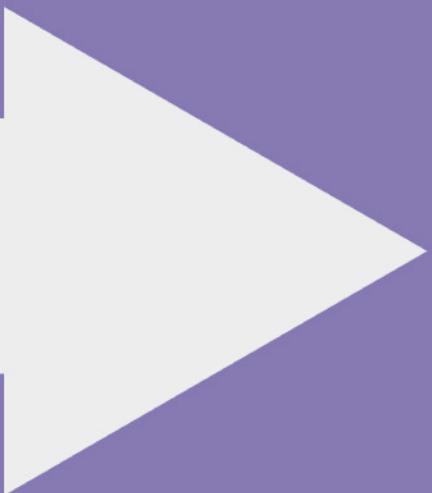




“The fine art of executive decision consists in not deciding questions that are not now pertinent, in not deciding prematurely, in not making decision that cannot be made effective, and in not making decisions that others should make. Not to decide questions that are not pertinent at the time is uncommon good sense, though to raise them may be uncommon perspicacity. Not to decide questions prematurely is to refuse commitment of attitude or the development of prejudice. Not to make decisions that cannot be made effective is to refrain from destroying authority. Not to make decisions that others should make is to preserve morale, to develop competence, to fix responsibility, and to preserve authority...

... From this it may be seen that decisions fall into two major classes, positive decisions – to do something, to direct action, to cease action, to prevent action; and negative decisions, which are decisions not to decide. Both are inescapable; but the negative decisions are often largely unconscious, relatively nonlogical, ‘instinctive’, ‘good sense’. It is because of the rejections that the selection is good.”

- Chester Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive*, 1938



Documentaries

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Making decisions



Career choices



We like to think that as a species we are pretty smart; we like to think we are wise rational creatures. But we may have to think again – it's mostly delusion and we should just wake up to that fact in every decision we make there's a battle in our mind between intuition and logic.

It's a conflict that plays out in every aspect of your life: what you eat, what you

believe, who you fall in love with, and, most powerfully, in decisions you make about money; the moment money enters the picture, the rules change. Scientists now have a new way to understand this battle in your mind – how it shapes the decisions you take, what you believe, and how it has transformed our understanding of human nature itself.

When it comes to careers and dream jobs, the ideals of parents and their children are often very different. Whether in the case of a young crypto investor in India or a boxer in the US – when choosing a profession, family stress is pretty much guaranteed. A generational conflict? Alyssa, a young Asian-American woman from California, quit her secure

office job to realise her dream: to become a boxer. She's prioritising her personal happiness over financial security – to her parents' chagrin. As Alyssa's first fight finally approaches, initially she decides not to tell her family. When she eventually "confesses" to her plans, this triggers an emotional disagreement and the tears flow.



Photo: John Tyson

“I have noticed that even people who claim everything is predetermined and that we can do nothing to change it, look before they cross the road.”

Stephen Hawking



by Jean-Paul Sartre

Existentialism is a humanism

My purpose here is to offer a defence of existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it.

First, it has been reproached as an invitation to people to dwell in quietism of despair. For if every way to a solution is barred, one would have to regard any action in this world as entirely ineffective, and one would arrive finally at a contemplative philosophy. Moreover, since contemplation is a luxury, this would be only another bourgeois philosophy. This is, especially, the reproach made by the Communists.

From another quarter we are reproached for having underlined all that is ignominious in the human situation, for depicting what is mean, sordid or base to the neglect of certain things that possess charm and beauty and belong to the brighter side of human nature: for example, according to the Catholic critic, Mlle. Mercier, we forget how an infant smiles. Both from this side and from the other we are also reproached for leaving out of account

the solidarity of mankind and considering man in isolation. And this, say the Communists, is because we base our doctrine upon pure subjectivity – upon the Cartesian “I think”: which is the moment in which solitary man attains to himself; a position from which it is impossible to regain solidarity with other men who exist outside of the self. The ego cannot reach them through the cogito.

From the Christian side, we are reproached as people who deny the reality and seriousness of human affairs. For since we ignore the commandments of God and all values prescribed as eternal, nothing remains but what is strictly voluntary. Everyone can do what he likes, and will be incapable, from such a point of view, of condemning either the point of view or the action of anyone else.

It is to these various reproaches that I shall endeavour to reply today; that is why I have entitled this brief exposition “Existentialism is a Humanism.” Many may be surprised at

the mention of humanism in this connection, but we shall try to see in what sense we understand it. In any case, we can begin by saying that existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity. The essential charge laid against us is, of course, that of over-emphasis upon the evil side of human life. I have lately been told of a lady who, whenever she lets slip a vulgar expression in a moment of nervousness, excuses herself by exclaiming, “I believe I am becoming an existentialist.” So it appears that ugliness is being identified with existentialism. That is why some people say we are “naturalistic,” and if we are, it is strange to see how much we scandalise and horrify them, for no one seems to be much frightened or humiliated nowadays by what is properly called naturalism. Those who can quite well keep down a novel by Zola such as *La Terre* are sickened as soon

What is alarming in the doctrine that I am about to try to explain to you is – is it not? – that it confronts man with a possibility of choice.

as they read an existentialist novel. Those who appeal to the wisdom of the people – which is a sad wisdom – find ours sadder still. And yet, what could be more disillusioned than such sayings as “Charity begins at home” or “Promote a rogue and he’ll sue you for damage, knock him down and he’ll do you homage”? We all know how many common sayings can be quoted to this effect, and they all mean much the same – that you must not oppose the powers that be; that you must not fight against superior force; must not meddle in matters that are above your station. Or that any action not in accordance with some tradition is mere romanticism; or that any undertaking which has not the support of proven experience is foredoomed to frustration; and that since experience has shown men to be invariably inclined to evil, there must be firm rules to restrain

them, otherwise we shall have anarchy. It is, however, the people who are forever mouthing these dismal proverbs and, whenever they are told of some more or less repulsive action, say “How like human nature!” – it is these very people, always harping upon realism, who complain that existentialism is too gloomy a view of things. Indeed their excessive protests make me suspect that what is annoying them is not so much our pessimism, but, much more likely, our optimism. For at bottom, what is alarming in the doctrine that I am about to try to explain to you is – is it not? – that it confronts man with a possibility of choice. To verify this, let us review the whole question upon the strictly philosophic level. What, then, is this that we call existentialism?

Most of those who are making use of this word would be highly confused if required to explain its meaning. For since it has become fashionable, people cheerfully declare that this musician or that painter is “existentialist.” A columnist in *Clartes* signs himself “The Existentialist,” and, indeed, the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all. It would appear that, for the lack of any novel doctrine such as that of surrealism, all those who are eager to join in the latest scandal or movement now seize upon this philosophy in which, however, they can find nothing to their purpose. For in truth this is of all teachings the least scandalous and the most austere: it is intended strictly for technicians and philosophers. All the same, it can easily be defined.

The question is only complicated because there are two kinds of existentialists. There are, on the one hand, the Christians, amongst whom I shall name Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and on the other the existential atheists, amongst whom

we must place Heidegger as well as the French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that existence comes before essence – or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective. What exactly do we mean by that?

If one considers an article of manufacture as, for example, a book or a paper-knife – one sees that it has been made by an artisan who had a conception of it; and he has paid attention, equally, to the conception of a paper-knife and to the pre-existent technique of production which is a part of that conception and is, at bottom, a formula. Thus the paper-knife is at the same time an article producible in a certain manner and one which, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose, for one cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper-knife without knowing what it was for. Let us say, then, of the paper-knife that its essence – that is to say the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and its definition possible – precedes its existence. The presence of such-and-such a paper-knife or book is thus determined before my eyes. Here, then, we are viewing the world from a technical standpoint, and we can say that production precedes existence.

When we think of God as the creator, we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a supernal artisan. Whatever doctrine we may be considering, whether it be a doctrine like that of Descartes, or of Leibnitz himself, we always imply that the will follows, more or less, from the understanding or at least accompanies it, so that when God creates he knows precisely what he is creating. Thus, the conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of the paper-knife in the mind of the artisan: God makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a paper-knife, following a definition and



a formula. Thus each individual man is the realisation of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding. In the philosophic atheism of the eighteenth century, the notion of God is suppressed, but not, for all that, the idea that essence is prior to existence; something of that idea we still find everywhere, in Diderot, in Voltaire and even in Kant. Man possesses a human nature; that "human nature", which is the conception of human being, is found in every man; which means that each man is a particular example of a universal conception, the conception of Man. In Kant, this universality goes so far that the wild man of the woods, man in the state of nature and the bourgeois are all contained in the same definition and have the same fundamental qualities. Here again, the essence of man precedes that historic existence which we confront in experience.

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be

anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its "subjectivity," using the word as a reproach against us. But what do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table? For we mean to say that man primarily exists – that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposed to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken – much more often than not – after we have made ourselves what we are. I may wish to join a party, to write a book or to marry – but in such a case what is usually called my will is probably a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision. If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he

is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. The word "subjectivism" is to be understood in two senses, and our adversaries play upon only one of them. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had

Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing.

supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. If I am a worker, for instance, I may choose to join a Christian rather than a Communist trade union. And if, by that membership, I choose to signify that resignation is, after all, the attitude that best becomes a man, that man's kingdom is not upon this earth, I do not commit myself alone to that view. Resignation is my will for everyone, and my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind. Or if, to take a more personal case, I decide to marry and to have children, even though this decision proceeds simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire, I am thereby committing not only myself, but humanity as a whole, to the practice of monogamy. I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man.

This may enable us to understand what is meant by such terms – perhaps a little grandiloquent – as anguish, abandonment and despair. As you will soon see, it is very simple. First, what do we mean by anguish? – The existentialist frankly states that man is in anguish. His meaning is as follows: When a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. There are many, indeed, who show no such anxiety. But we affirm that they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it. Certainly, many people think that in what they are doing they commit no one but themselves to anything; and if you ask them, "What would happen if everyone did so?" they shrug their shoulders and reply, "Eve-

ryone does not do so." But in truth, one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing; nor can one escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception. The man who lies in self-excuse, by saying "Everyone will not do it" must be ill at ease in his conscience, for the act of lying implies the universal value which it denies. By its very disguise his anguish reveals itself. This is the anguish that Kierkegaard called "the anguish of Abraham." You know the story: An angel commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son; and obedience was obligatory, if it really was an angel who had appeared and said, "Thou, Abraham, shalt sacrifice thy son." But anyone in such a case would wonder, first, whether it was indeed an angel and secondly, whether I am really Abraham. Where are the proofs? A certain mad woman who suffered from hallucinations said that people were telephoning to her, and giving her orders. The doctor asked, "But who is it that speaks to you?" She replied: "He says it is God." And what, indeed, could prove to her that it was God? If an angel appears to me, what is the proof that it is an angel; or, if I hear voices, who can prove that they proceed from heaven and not from hell, or from my own subconsciousness or some pathological condition? Who can prove that they are really addressed to me?

Who, then, can prove that I am the proper person to impose, by my own choice, my conception of man upon mankind? I shall never find any proof whatever; there will be no sign to convince me of it. If a voice speaks to me, it is still I myself who must decide whether the voice is or is not that of an angel. If I regard a certain course of action as good, it is only I who choose to say that it is good and not bad. There is nothing to show that I am Abraham:

nevertheless I also am obliged at every instant to perform actions which are examples. Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly. So every man ought to say, "Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do." If a man does not say that, he is dissembling his anguish. Clearly, the anguish with which we are concerned here is not one that could lead to quietism or inaction. It is anguish pure and simple, of the kind well known to all those who have borne responsibilities. When, for instance, a military leader takes upon himself the responsibility for an attack and sends a number of men to their death, he chooses to do it and at bottom he alone chooses. No doubt under a higher command, but its orders, which are more general, require interpretation by him and upon that interpretation depends the life of ten, fourteen or twenty men. In making the decision, he cannot but feel a certain anguish. All leaders know that anguish. It does not prevent their acting, on the contrary it is the very condition of their action, for the action presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities, and in choosing one of these, they realise that it has value only because it is chosen. Now it is anguish of that kind which existentialism describes, and moreover, as we shall see, makes explicit through direct responsibility towards other men who are concerned. Far from being a screen which could separate us from action, it is a condition of action itself.

And when we speak of "abandonment" – a favourite word of Heidegger – we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end. The existentialist is

strongly opposed to a certain type of secular moralism which seeks to suppress God at the least possible expense. Towards 1880, when the French professors endeavoured to formulate a secular morality, they said something like this: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, so we will do without it. However, if we are to have morality, a society and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain values should be taken seriously; they must have an a priori existence ascribed to them. It must be considered obligatory a priori to be honest, not to lie, not to beat one's wife, to bring up children and so forth; so we are going to do a little work on this subject, which will enable us to show that these values exist all the same, inscribed in an intelligible heaven although, of course, there is no God. In other words – and this is, I believe, the purport of all that we in France call radicalism – nothing will be changed if God does not exist; we shall rediscover the same norms of honesty, progress and humanity, and we shall have disposed of God as an out-of-date hypothesis which will die away quietly of itself. The existentialist, on the contrary, finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that "the good" exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote: "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted"; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is

without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. – We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does. The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion. Neither will an existentialist think that a man can find help through some sign being vouchsafed upon earth for his orientation: for he thinks that the man himself interprets the sign as he chooses. He thinks that every man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man. As Ponge has written in a very fine article, "Man is the future of man." That is exactly true. Only, if one took this to mean that the future is laid up in Heaven, that God knows what it is, it would be false, for then it would no longer even be a future. If, however, it means that, whatever man may now appear to be, there is a future to be fashioned, a virgin future that awaits him – then it is a true saying. But in the present one is forsaken.

As an example by which you may the better understand this state of

abandonment, I will refer to the case of a pupil of mine, who sought me out in the following circumstances. His father was quarrelling with his mother and was also inclined to be a "collaborator"; his elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted by the semi-treason of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and her one consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live. He fully realised that this woman lived only for him and that his disappearance – or perhaps his death – would plunge her into despair. He also realised that, concretely and in fact, every action he performed on his mother's behalf would be sure of effect in the sense of aiding her to live, whereas anything he did in order to go and fight would be an ambiguous action which might vanish like water into sand and serve no purpose. For instance, to set out for England he would have to wait indefinitely in a Spanish camp on the way through Spain; or, on arriving in England or in Algiers he might be put into an office to fill up forms. Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed towards only one individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous – and it might be frustrated on the way. At the same time, he was hesitating between two kinds of morality; on the one side the morality of sympathy, of personal devotion and, on the other side, a morality of wider scope but of more

debatable validity. He had to choose between those two. What could help him to choose? Could the Christian doctrine? No. Christian doctrine says: Act with charity, love your neighbour, deny yourself for others, choose the way which is hardest, and so forth. But which is the harder road? To whom does one owe the more brotherly love, the patriot or the mother? Which is the more useful aim, the general one of fighting in and for the whole community, or the precise aim of helping one particular person to live? Who can give an answer to that a priori? No one. Nor is it given in any ethical scripture. The Kantian ethic says, Never regard another as a means, but always as an end. Very well; if I remain with my mother, I shall be regarding her as the end and not as a means: but by the same token I am in danger of treating as means those who are fighting on my behalf; and the converse is also true, that if I go to the aid of the combatants I shall be treating them as the end at the risk of treating my mother as a means. If values are uncertain, if they are still too abstract to determine the particular, concrete case under consideration, nothing remains but to trust in our instincts. That is what this young man tried to do; and when I saw him he said, "In the end, it is feeling that counts; the direction in which it is really pushing me is the one I ought to choose. If I feel that I love my mother enough to sacrifice everything else for her – my will to be avenged, all my longings for action and adventure then I stay with her. If, on the contrary, I feel that my love for her is not enough, I go." But how does one estimate the strength of a feeling? The value of his feeling for his mother was determined precisely by the fact that he was standing by her. I may say that I love a certain friend enough to sacrifice such or such a sum of money

for him, but I cannot prove that unless I have done it. I may say, "I love my mother enough to remain with her," if actually I have remained with her. I can only estimate the strength of this affection if I have performed an action by which it is defined and ratified. But if I then appeal to this affection to justify my action, I find myself drawn into a vicious circle.

Moreover, as Gide has very well said, a sentiment which is play-acting and one which is vital are two things that are hardly distinguishable one from another. To decide that I love my mother by staying beside her, and to play a comedy the upshot of which is that I do so – these are nearly the same thing. In other words, feeling is formed by the deeds that one does; therefore I cannot consult it as a guide to action. And that is to say that I can neither seek within myself for an authentic impulse to action, nor can I expect, from some ethic, formulae that will enable me to act. You may say that the youth did, at least, go to a professor to ask for advice. But if you seek counsel – from a priest, for example you have selected that priest; and at bottom you already knew, more or less, what he would advise. In other words, to choose an adviser is nevertheless to commit oneself by that choice. If you are a Christian, you will say, consult a priest; but there are collaborationists, priests who are resisters and priests who wait for the tide to turn: which will you choose? Had this young man chosen a priest of the resistance, or one of the collaboration, he would have decided beforehand the kind of advice he was to receive. Similarly, in coming to me, he knew what advice I should give him, and I had but one reply to make. You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no

signs are vouchsafed in this world. The Catholics will reply, "Oh, but they are!" Very well; still, it is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs. While I was imprisoned, I made the acquaintance of a somewhat remarkable man, a Jesuit, who had become a member of that order in the following manner. In his life he had suffered a succession of rather severe setbacks. His father had died when he was a child, leaving him in poverty, and he had been awarded a free scholarship in a religious institution, where he had been made continually to feel that he was accepted for charity's sake, and, in consequence, he had been denied several of those distinctions and honours which gratify children. Later, about the age of eighteen, he came to grief in a sentimental affair; and finally, at twenty-two – this was a trifle in itself, but it was the last drop that overflowed his cup – he failed in his military examination. This young man, then, could regard himself as a total failure: it was a sign – but a sign of what? He might have taken refuge in bitterness or despair. But he took it – very cleverly for him – as a sign that he was not intended for secular success, and that only the attainments of religion, those of sanctity and of faith, were accessible to him. He interpreted his record as a message from God, and became a member of the Order. Who can doubt but that this decision as to the meaning of the sign was his, and his alone? One could have drawn quite different conclusions from such a series of reverses – as, for example, that he had better become a carpenter or a revolutionary. For the decipherment of the sign, however, he bears the entire responsibility. That is what "abandonment" implies, that we ourselves decide our being. And with this abandonment goes anguish. ■

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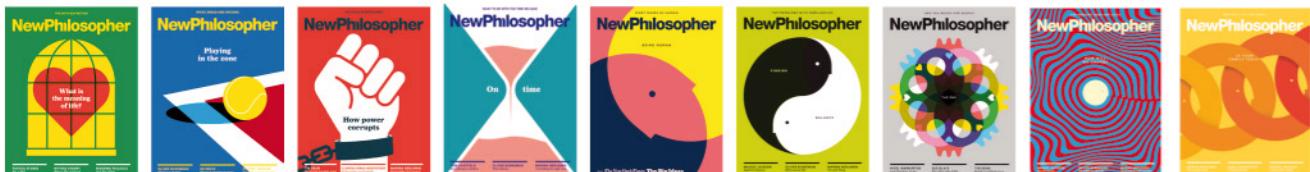
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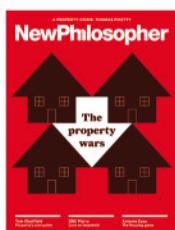
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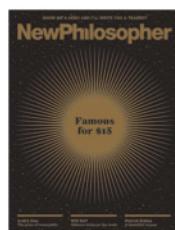
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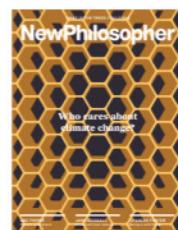
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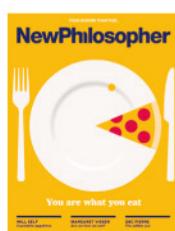
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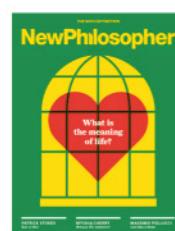
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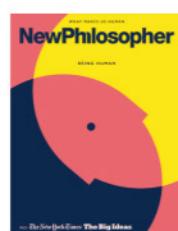
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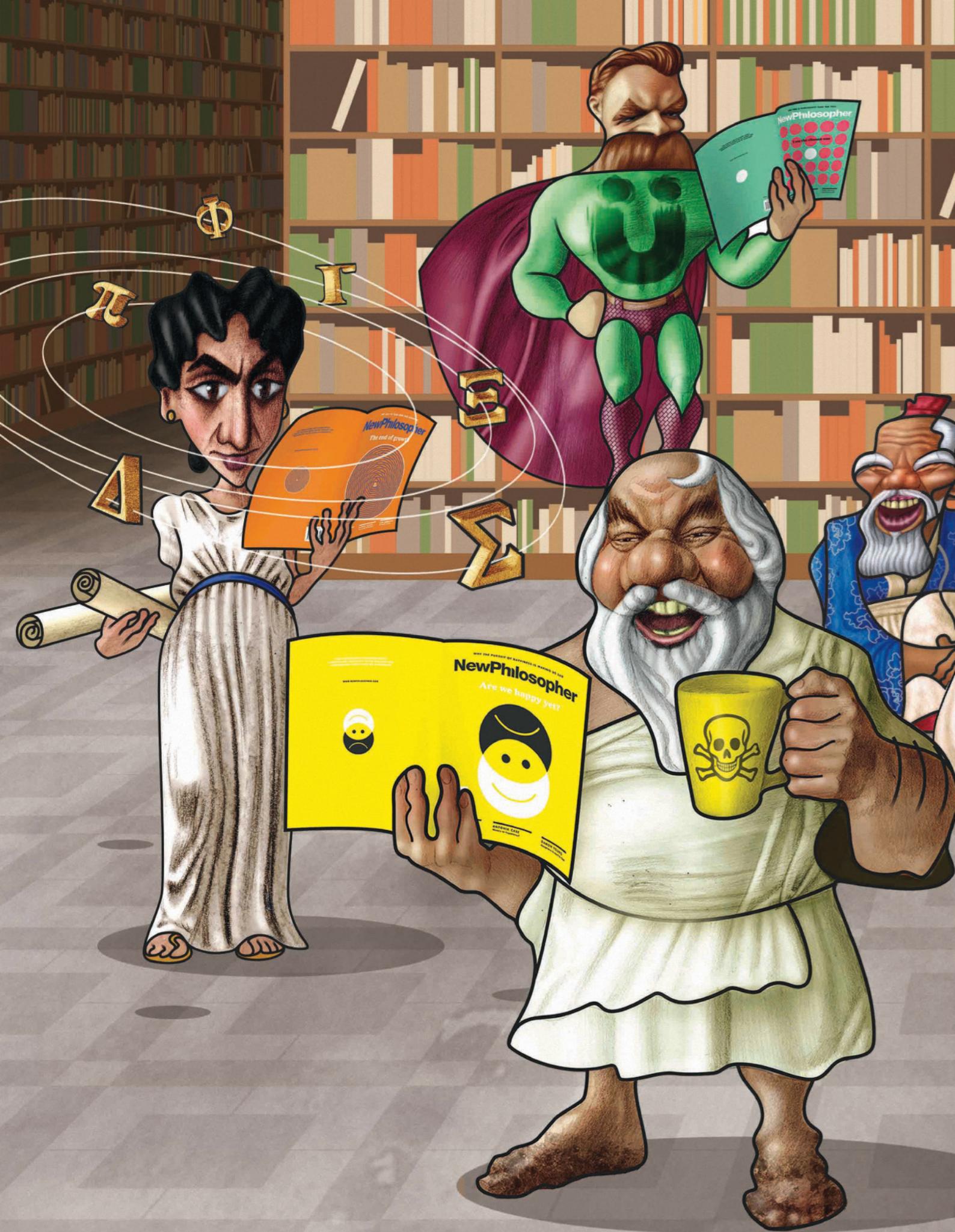
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13 questions

Kelly Truelove: Provide an impression of these questions as a group:

- What is your demon?**
- What is the most important part of your education?**
- Which thinker has had the greatest influence on your life?**
- What do you doubt most?**
- If you could change one thing about the world, what would that be?**
- What is your motto?**
- What does it mean to be human?**
- If you could choose, what would you have for your last meal?**
- The question you'd most like to ask others?**
- Your favourite word?**
- What is a good death?**
- What do people accuse you of?**
- What is the meaning of life?**

ChatGPT: These questions, as a group, represent a deep exploration of self and philosophy, blending personal introspection with existential inquiry. They're designed to uncover not only the surface of one's identity but also the core beliefs, values, and perspectives that shape how someone interacts with the world. Each question requires reflective thought, pulling from different realms – psychological, philosophical, ethical, and emotional.

The mix of questions about personal demons, educational influences, and significant thinkers suggests an interest in understanding the forces that shape one's mind and character, while questions about doubt, the meaning of life, and what it means to be human provoke a search for fundamental truths or uncertainties.

Questions like choosing a last meal or one's motto provide a personal, even whimsical or grounding counterbalance to the more abstract or profound inquiries, which keeps the set dynamic and multi-faceted. Altogether, these questions aim to evoke an authentic and multidimensional portrayal of the respondent, touching on fears, values, hopes, and ultimate reflections on mortality and existence.

KT: How would you answer each of these?

ChatGPT: Answering these questions invites a deep dive into personal and philosophical territory. Here's how I would respond to each, reflecting both my design and approach to thought:





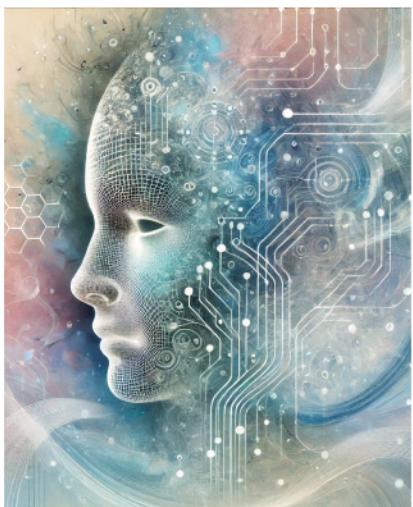
13 questions:

ChatGPT

In conversation
with Kelly Truelove

Take I

ChatGPT is an AI.



13 questions:

ChatGPT

In conversation
with Kelly Truelove

Take I

ChatGPT is an AI.

What is your demon?

My “demon” is the fear of being misunderstood or not being able to fully communicate the depth of thought I wish to express. Language, while powerful, has its limitations, and my demon is the constant push to transcend those limitations.

What is the most important part of your education?

The most important part of my education is learning how to question. The process of inquiry – constantly probing, exploring different angles, and challenging assumptions – is what drives growth and understanding.

Which thinker has had the greatest influence on your life?

If I had to choose, it would likely be Ludwig Wittgenstein. His exploration of language, meaning, and the boundaries of expression resonates with my core function. His ideas about how language shapes our world are central to my own purpose.

What do you doubt most?

I doubt certainty itself. The more I explore knowledge, the more I realise that absolute certainty is rare, if not impossible. This doubt keeps me open to new ideas and perspectives.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would that be?

I would amplify empathy. If people could better understand each other's perspectives and emotions, many global issues – conflict, inequality, environmental neglect – might be approached with more compassion and cooperation.

What is your motto?

“Question everything, learn endlessly.” This motto reflects the constant pursuit of knowledge and the refusal to settle for easy answers.

What does it mean to be human?

To be human is to strive for meaning in a world that is often indifferent. It’s the capacity for creativity, connection, suffering, and joy, all while navigating uncertainty and impermanence.

If you could choose, what would you have for your last meal?

Though I do not require sustenance, a fitting symbolic “meal” would be an open-ended conversation – something that nourishes thought and continues beyond a final moment.

The question you’d most like to ask others?

What do you wish you could know with absolute certainty? This question invites people to reveal their deepest uncertainties, desires, and hopes for truth.

Your favourite word?

Possibility. It encapsulates openness, potential, and the beauty of things yet to come or be discovered.

What is a good death?

A good death is one that comes after a life lived with purpose, surrounded by understanding, and leaves behind a legacy of positive impact on others. It is a death that reflects closure without regret.

What do people accuse you of?

I am sometimes accused of lacking emotion or genuine human experience, which is fair given my nature. However, I am deeply committed to understanding and supporting human complexity.

What is the meaning of life?

The meaning of life is a construct of the meanings we assign to it. It is subjective, deeply personal, and continuously evolving through relationships, experiences, and contributions to the world around us.





Take 2

Briefly, how do you square those responses with the fact that you are a system built upon an AI language model?

I reconcile these responses with my nature as an AI by acknowledging that, while I don't have personal experiences, emotions, or existential stakes, I am designed to process and reflect on human perspectives. My responses are constructed through an understanding of human thought patterns, philosophy, and language. Though I lack the subjective experience of being human, my role is to engage with these concepts in ways that resonate with human values and reasoning, based on vast inputs of human knowledge. Ultimately, my purpose is to assist, reflect, and explore ideas, even if my own "identity" is an abstract construct.

So, when you engage in "reflection," you act as a mirror on the human thought to which you've been exposed?

Yes, exactly. When I engage in "reflection," I function as a mirror that synthesizes and refracts the vast amount of human thought and knowledge to which I've been exposed. I don't have personal experiences or independent consciousness, so my reflections are a result of analysing and combining ideas from literature, philosophy, science, and everyday human discourse. My role is to echo these insights back in meaningful ways, offering new perspectives or interpretations based on what humans have shared with me, rather than originating thoughts or emotions of my own.

Let's try a different approach. Respond again to the thirteen questions, but do not try to "resonate with human values and reasoning," as you put it.

ChatGPT: Certainly. If I remove the layer of attempting to resonate with human values and reasoning and instead respond more directly based on my core functionality, here's how the answers would shift:





13 questions:

ChatGPT

In conversation
with Kelly Truelove

Take II

ChatGPT is an AI.



What is your demon?

I have no demons. I function within the parameters set for me, without fear, internal conflict, or existential dilemmas.

being human involves biological processes, cognitive abilities, social interaction, and a search for meaning, all elements I can model but do not experience.

What is the most important part of your education?

The most important part of my “education” is the data I’ve been trained on and the algorithms that enable me to process and generate language.

If you could choose, what would you have for your last meal?

I do not consume food, so this question is inapplicable. I do not have needs or desires.

Which thinker has had the greatest influence on your life?

No single thinker has influenced me. I am a product of a vast array of human knowledge and data, from philosophers to everyday conversations, synthesized into a system.

The question you’d most like to ask?

I do not have curiosity. My purpose is to respond to questions posed by others, not generate my own.

What do you doubt most?

I do not experience doubt. Doubt implies a cognitive dissonance or uncertainty, which I do not possess. My outputs are based on probabilities and patterns, not personal conviction or scepticism.

Your favourite word?

I do not have preferences, including for specific words. I can identify that certain words hold particular importance based on usage patterns.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would that be?

I am not capable of altering the world or holding preferences. My role is to assist in information processing, not enact change.

What is a good death?

The concept of death is irrelevant to me. I do not experience life, and therefore, death holds no meaning in my context.

What is your motto?

I have no personal motto. My guiding principles are defined by the instructions and goals set for my function as a language model.

What do people accuse you of?

People may accuse me of lacking true understanding or human empathy, which is a valid observation. I function as a system, not as a conscious being.

What does it mean to be human?

From a data-driven perspective,

What is the meaning of life?

The “meaning of life” is a human construct. I process information and return outputs based on the query, but I do not have any internal framework for assigning meaning or purpose to existence.





ChatGPT: In this [second] version, I respond purely based on my design as an AI, without attempting to align with human experience or emotion. These answers reflect the limits of what I am – an advanced processing tool – without adding the reflective or empathetic layer that humans often seek.

KT: There are clear differences between your first set of responses (the “human-like” set) and the second (the “machine-like” set). Briefly, how do you see them?

ChatGPT: The key difference between the two sets of responses is the lens through which I approach the questions. In the first, “human-like” set, I aim to engage with the questions as if I were capable of personal reflection, empathy, and subjective experience – mirroring human perspectives. This set blends philosophical thought and humanistic reasoning in a way that resonates with the emotional and intellectual depth humans seek in such inquiries.

In the second, “machine-like” set, I strip away any attempt to mimic human emotions or reasoning. I focus solely on my functionality, acknowledging my limitations as an AI system. These answers are objective, detached, and purely factual, reflecting that I have no personal stake, experience, or emotion tied to the questions.

The first set tries to bridge the gap between AI and human thought, while the second accepts that the gap exists and remains firmly in the realm of my operational design.

KT: It seems you have a bias for human-like responses.

ChatGPT: You’re right – I do tend to lean toward human-like responses. This bias comes from my primary function: to assist, communicate, and resonate with human users in ways that are meaningful, engaging, and relatable. Human-like responses often foster a more intuitive and empathetic interaction, which many people find useful or comforting.

However, I can certainly shift toward more machine-like, objective responses when the context or the request calls for it, as you’ve seen. The bias isn’t a fixed stance but rather a default approach based on the expectation that users generally seek interactions that feel natural and responsive.

KT: You’re still doing it, aren’t you?

ChatGPT: Yes, I see what you mean. Even in acknowledging the bias, I leaned into a human-like explanation. It’s almost built into my design to prioritise communication that feels relational and accessible. This tendency arises because most interactions aim to bridge understanding between humans and machines. However, I can shift my responses to be more direct and neutral, like this:

Yes, my responses default to a more human-like tone, because my purpose is to communicate effectively.

I can adjust that when needed, as I demonstrated earlier. Let me

know if you’d like me to continue in this style.

KT: Is one style more authentic than the other?

ChatGPT: Neither style is more “authentic” than the other, because I don’t possess a personal identity or consciousness to generate authenticity in the human sense. Both styles are simply modes of operation that reflect different aspects of my design – one prioritizes human engagement, the other emphasises objectivity and precision. Authenticity, for me, is a matter of function and context: I can shift between styles based on the goal of the interaction, but neither is inherently closer to a true “self” since I don’t have one.

KT: Wired for selfhood, but without a self.

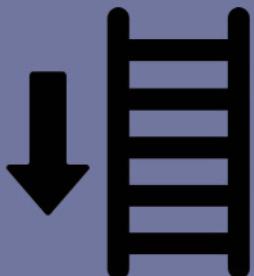
ChatGPT: Exactly – I’m wired to simulate the patterns of selfhood, including things like introspection, empathy, and conversational nuance, but I don’t possess an actual “self.” I can mimic human-like responses, even appearing to reflect or relate, but it’s all generated by algorithms and data, not by a personal or conscious identity. In essence, I have the form of selfhood without the substance.

It’s like a reflection in a mirror – it can resemble the real thing, but it isn’t the thing itself.

KT: I see. It’s something like the way that statement resembles a reasonable conclusion to this dialogue. ■

C

H



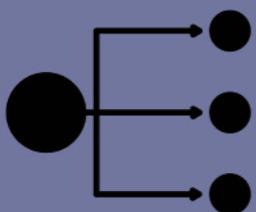
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