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Opting: The Case of »Big« Decisions

Diesem Aufsatz liegt folgendes Bild zugrunde: die vorherrschende Entscheidungstheorie hat Geltung hauptsächlich für Entscheidungen von »mittlerer Größe«, während sowohl die äußerst »kleinen« wie die extrem »großen« Entscheidungen gesondert behandelt werden müssen. Der Aufsatz beschäftigt sich mit den letztgenannten. Es sollen Umstände charakterisiert werden, die als »Opting-Situationen« bezeichnet werden und solch »große«, selbsttransformierende (private) Entscheidungen beinhalten. Es wird weiterhin versucht, die Opting-Situationen den Fällen von Bekehrung (Converting) einerseits und Getriebenwerden (Drifting) andererseits gegenüberzustellen. Die These lautet, daß der gebräuchliche Begriff der rationalen Entscheidung in bezug auf die Opting-Fälle nicht hinreichend ist.

I

A long standing, classical philosophical question is the question What Am I to Do. A contemporary approach to this central question of practical reasoning has produced the product known as decision theory. This theory, widely studied and applied in such fields as economics and psychology, has attained an impressive degree of technical mathematical elaboration; it has in fact established itself as an independent field of research.

In what follows I do not propose to deal with decision theory as such. I shall want rather to focus on what I take to be some of its limits, which are of interest to the philosophical concern with practical reasoning.

Let me start with the following analogy. Somewhat as classical Newtonian physics is taken to hold good and valid for middle-sized objects, whereas different concepts and laws apply to the phenomena of the micro and the macro, I suggest that we might think of the theory of decision as relating to what we might term middle-sized, ordinary decisions. There remain the two extremes, the very »small« decisions on the one hand and the very »big« decisions on the other, which may pose a certain challenge to the ordinary decision theory and may consequently require a separate treatment.

Now by »small« decisions I have in mind cases where one is strictly indifferent with regard to the alternatives before him, where one's preferences over the alternatives are completely symmetrical. Like, for example, when someone comes to you with a bowl full of what you take to be identical candies, you are not allowed to take more than one, and you prefer taking one to taking none at all. To the extent that we take choosing to be choosing for

a reason, and choosing for a reason to presuppose preferences, it seems that we have to conclude that in such cases rational choice is precluded. Or, as Leibniz put it in his Theodicy: »In things which are absolutely indifferent there can be no choice ... since choice must have some reason or principle.«

I have elsewhere dealt with this type of cases, referring to them as instances of *picking* rather than choosing.' There is actually something unfair about referring to picking as the realm of »small« decisions. True, many of our trivial daily decisions may be cases of picking rather than choosing. But not all cases of picking need be trivial. What we are to bear in mind, then, is that in speaking of »small decisions« it is not their triviality or insignificance which is referred to, but rather their involving symmetry of preferences and equally-balanced reasons for choice.

Be that as it may, my present topic is not the picking end of the scale but its other end. I should like to start by characterizing the type of big decisions I want to focus on. These will be big *personal* decisions only, such that are critical to the way the individual's own life continues. Excluded from the discussion altogether are big decisions one may take in virtue of one's official position or institutional role and which affect primarily the lives of others, like a statesman's decision to go to war or a judge's decision to sentence the defendant to death.

Let me proceed, then, to delineate the sphere of decisions that will henceforth be referred to as cases of *opting*.

U

The first feature of a case of opting is this: it is a decision situation involving alternatives likely to determine, or transform, the person's future self. The idea is that in facing an opting situation one stands at a critical juncture in one's life. The choice one takes determines, or transforms, one's life project and the inner core of one's person.

Now the broad and vague expressions >future self<, >life project<, and >inner core< are useful at this initial stage of the exposition precisely because they are so suggestive and can be construed in so many different ways. But in order to do the rather more specific job that the notion of opting will be expected to do, the formulation will have to be narrowed down. Namely, I shall now talk of opting as a decision situation involving alternatives likely to significantly affect the person's beliefs and utilities, i. e. his cognitive as well as his evaluative systems. Insofar as our beliefs and utilities shape, at least partially, the core of what we are, we may say that someone facing an opting situation emerges from it a different person.

To be sure, there is a sense in which every choice changes us somewhat. It

is in part the cumulative effect of such incremental changes that makes us change as life goes on and as we grow older. But what I am here calling attention to are the instances where there is a point of sharp discontinuity; where a person's inner core of beliefs and utilities does not simply go on evolving but where it undergoes a more or less abrupt transformation.

Note that people may sometimes face a critical juncture, a point of discontinuity and transformation, which we shall not want to refer to as an instance of opting. This happens when the turning point is not brought about by one's own move or choice but results from an external happening like an accident, or death in the family, a collapse of the stock market, a draft to serve in a war, and so on. Such cases do not concern us here.

Moving on now to the second characteristic feature of opting situations I submit that it is their irrevocability: they are points of no return.

Now again, in a strict, literal sense, *whatever* is done cannot be undone, words said cannot be literally unsaid, an arm raised can be lowered but not unraised. And yet of course we all know that a great many of our deeds, in a rather straightforward sense, are not irreversible. One may apologize, compensate, return, or retreat. There are plenty of devices whereby one may restore the situation to the way it was prior to one's action, or at any rate to something sufficiently similar or equivalent to it. To be sure, this is not without its costs, in terms of time, money, effort or what have you.

So in saying of the opting situations that they constitute points of no return what is meant is to mark them off from these run-of-the-mill cases of decision and action. It is to suggest that they are different, perhaps just in degree but possibly indeed in kind. When opting one is embarking upon a road which, as from a certain point, is one way only: a return is either strictly impossible or else involving prohibitive costs. In addition there is also the following conceptual point. Since opting is being postulated as involving an inner-core change in the opting person, the very notion of going back on one's own decision may, strictly speaking, be meaningless here. One may perhaps *wish* one were back at the pre-opting state, just as one may wish one were a Rothschild; but it is not a real possibility.

Proceeding to the next item on the list of characteristic features of opting situations, we arrive at the element of awareness. It is constitutive of the opting situation that, upon facing it, the person is conscious of its being an opting situation. That is, not only is it, as a matter of fact, a critical juncture and a point of no return, but it is also perceived as such by the person concerned. We may put this more precisely, in terms of a two-clause *epistemic condition*: in an opting situation the person believes (a) that he is called upon to make a genuine choice between two viable alternatives (at least), and (b) that the decision he is called upon to make is core affecting and irrevocable.

The significance of this stipulation will be seen shortly. When either of its clauses is dropped, one gets instances which are no longer ones of opting but rather ones of converting, or of drifting. But this is already jumping ahead.

The fourth and last feature is perhaps only an ancillary to the first three, or possibly a derivative of them. Yet it deserves to be mentioned separately. It concerns the shadow presence of the rejected option.

Let me explain. In an ordinary choice situation there is a set of alternatives from which the person chooses one. Upon his decision the other, non-chosen members of this set ordinarily cease to exist as far as he is concerned. A fairly adequate and cogent account of a person's life can be obtained by simply proceeding to describe the succession of steps taken by this person, without ever having to mention any of the train of rejected, non-materialized alternatives he's left behind.

In the case of opting, however, matters are different. It is characteristic, I suggest, of the type of decision situations referred to as opting situations that the rejected, un-opted-for option maintains a sort of lingering presence for the person. I suggest in other words that what is of significance to the person's *account of his own life is not only the option he's taken, but also the one he's rejected*. The rejected option enters in an essential way into the person's description of his life, the shadow presence it maintains possibly constituting a yardstick by which this person evaluates the success, failure, or worth of the project of his life.

III

Having described the opting situation, we must now ask: are there opting situations?

Well, cases that come to mind may include for example King Edward VIII who made the agonizing decision to leave the throne for the sake of the woman he loved. Or perhaps Father Cardinal in Nicaragua who had recently had to choose between his life in the Jesuit Order and his political mission as a minister of culture in the Sandinista government. One may think of the early Zionist socialist pioneers who, in the 1920s, left everything behind and came to Palestine in order to create, indeed to become, the New Jews of their ideals. Or, *mutatis mutandis*, of those who defect from any of the East-bloc countries to the West. The Biblical Ruth may be said to have opted to tie her fate with that of her mother-in-law Naomi who was returning from Moab to her native land and people in Bethlehem. So also may be the case of a person who is talented enough to face a clear choice, early in life, between two different career options, say between being a concert pianist on the one hand, and a mathematician or nuclear physicist on the other.

I do not intend to pause here to analyze these examples. My interest lies rather in pursuing the conceptual mapping of the terrain. I offer these illustrations tentatively, in the hope that they are suggestive enough to indicate to us the flavour of the »big« decisions I'm after, whether they be options thrust upon us in the name of love, duty or talent, of political or religious convictions, of optimistic idealism or the depth of despair.

A few points may nevertheless be extracted from the suggested examples as they stand.

First, in contrast to ordinary decision situations, opting situations are extraordinary. One may well complete the course of one's life without ever having had to opt. But note: their being extraordinary does *not* mean that opting instances are somehow abnormal, perverse or pathological. Therefore one who is interested in human decision making may not, I believe, validly ignore them by arguing that they lie outside the realm of »normal« decision making. Also, equally invalid in my view is the other, alternative way of treating pathological cases, namely the Freudian approach according to which a better understanding of the pathological sheds a stronger light on the normal. I maintain, rather, that opting situations constitute a limiting case of the normal, ordinary decision situations. Their characteristic features set them apart as less frequent and more dramatic decisions, and as such they may pose their own challenge to the notion of a reasoned choice (as we shall see later). The delineation of their province, therefore, has the potential of enriching our picture of human deliberation.

Secondly, a distinction may be felt to be called for, between what may be termed opting (A, B) and opting (Yes, No). In an opting-(A, B) situation one faces a decision between two new life options. In an opting-(Yes, No) situation the choice is between the Yes, i. e. the new life option, and the No, i. e. the continuation in one's present life path (which may nevertheless not be quite what it was before, owing to the shadow presence of the Yes option).

N

Why were the examples offered tentatively? What is it that stands in the way of a clear-cut determination whether a given case is a case of opting?

In order to approach an answer to these questions, consider these further cases. In making his final move to live as a peasant among his fellow Russian peasants, was Tolstoy opting? In leaving their families and possessions behind and joining Jesus of Nazareth, were the Apostles opting? I suggest that there is a thin, albeit significant, line dividing the cases of opting, as here conceived and presented, from cases of *converting*, which I shall now proceed to discuss.

Regardless of whether and to what an extent we believe that we understand the phenomenon of conversion, it is certainly eminently familiar to us - from literature, from history, and from life.²

Like cases of opting, converting is about a life-transforming, core-affecting, largely irrevocable move. Also, instances of conversion are often dramatic. Now the dividing line between opting and converting pertains in the first place, I suggest, to one clause of what was earlier presented as the epistemic condition.

In converting, like in opting, one is aware that one is about to significantly change one's life. But the other belief conjunct is missing here. In converting it is not the case that one believes that one is called upon to make a genuine decision between equally viable alternatives. From the point of view of the convert he has no choice in the matter; typically he would have a strong sense of being compelled, of there being no other way.

Another feature distinguishing converting from opting has to do with the nature of the shadow presence of the rejected option. Cases of conversion are akin to what was earlier termed Yes-No options, the rejected option being the continuation on the path of one's previous life. Typically, for the person who has undergone conversion, his previous life is not just technically rejected, insofar as a new form of life is being adopted, but also normatively rejected. The convert views his previous life in a negative light, he evaluates it as wrong or wicked.

I have mentioned two points, then, on which instances of converting diverge from instances of opting: the construal of the juncture point as something other than a decision situation, and the negative evaluation of one's previous life. Now it is readily seen that both of these points are perspective oriented. They have to do with the way the person sees his situation. In other words from the point of view of a spectator there maybe much similarity between opting and converting cases, even though from the point of view of the actor they are quite dissimilar.

Hence the aura of tentativeness about the examples. Whether a given instance is one resulting from a reasoned big decision or from a conversion experience is a question that cannot be settled by a mere labeling of the act as, say, an act of defection, or immigration, etc. We need to know more. And as for Tolstoy, or the Apostles, I suspect that, upon a closer look, they are likelier to turn out to have been converts than opters.

Before moving on with the main line of the exposition let me draw attention to the following point: cases of formal, or technical religious conversion may at times count as »normal« decisions, and occasionally indeed as cases of opting. What I have in mind are the numerous instances of Jews who have converted to Christianity so as to remove an obstacle from the path of their chosen career (like Heinrich Heine or Gustav Mahler), or in order to

open up doors for their children (like Abraham Mendelssohn, Felix's father).

The point here is that the actual act of exchanging one's religion need not in every case be a matter of a conversion *experience* in the sense here employed (and so dramatically illustrated by instances such as St. Paul or Ratisbonne). The experience, I suggest, may well at times have been close to that of opting.

Pascal's argument known as the Wager is an interesting case in point. It is an argument designed to convince non-believers to opt for the Catholic faith through a process of a reasoned decision, not conversion.

V

A rather central element is still missing from our picture. In the last section a certain contrast was creepingly introduced, namely that between the result of a cool, reasoned decision process and the result of a conversion experience. What lies behind this contrast?

We come up here against the notion of reasons, and it is with regard to this notion that the phenomena of opting and converting differ markedly. Put briefly, in the case of opting the expectation is that reasons are to prevail. In the case of converting, though, it is typically causes and motives, rather than reasons, which have the upper hand. In saying this I am making use of the tripartite reasons/causes/motives distinction, which is rather well-entrenched in the current philosophical literature. Without too much of a digression, but for the sake of clarity of the exposition, let it just be said that causes are taken to operate on the physical level, motives on the psychological, and reasons on the logical level.

The point, then, is that it is the phenomenon of opting which is continuous with the realm which constitutes the framework of this study, namely the realm of human decision making, or practical deliberation. Conversion, in contrast, while being at certain points, as I have tried to show, a very close neighbour of opting, lies outside this realm. In other words opting lends itself to a cognitive approach, converting to almost any approach but the cognitive.

Let us probe this somewhat further.

In saying that opting is expected to be guided by reasons what is meant is simply this, that one would expect the opter to arrive at his decision in much the same way that his ordinary, »smaller« decisions are arrived at. And this in turn means that one would expect cases of opting to be open to so-called rational-choice explanations.

Concisely put (- I am here following Jon Elster³ -) an ideal explanation

of an action as an expression of rational choice will do the following. It will strive to show the action as the best way of satisfying the full set of the person's desires [utilities], given his set of beliefs formed on the basis of the [optimal amount of] evidence at his disposal. In addition, in order for the explanation to really constitute a *rational-choice* explanation, the further standard requirement is added, that both the set of beliefs and the set of desires of the person be internally consistent.

Now this formulation is not only concise, it is also quite packed. There are layers of theorizing behind it, and it glosses over many difficulties. However, for the purposes at hand there is no need to start unpacking it. Armed with this conceptual equipment, we can go back to our cases of opting.

A plausible initial response to the question of their rationality would, I suppose, be this. Not only is an opting person expected to act rationally, but - if anything - he is expected to be even more rational about his opting decision than about his other, ordinary decisions, because there is of course so much more at stake. This means that one would expect the opting person to take extra time and care in amassing relevant information as his evidence base, to exercise extra caution in assessing the alternatives open to him and in bringing his own set of desires (valuations, inclinations, aspirations) to bear upon them, and soon. In short, one would expect an opting act to be an exemplary candidate for the ideal rational-choice explanations just delineated.

But is this really the case? How rational are opters, and how rational ought they to be?

Well, these are two distinct questions. The first question is empirical, of which I have little to say. I'm told that there is some evidence to the effect that the attitude of people towards what they perceive as their big decisions is quite the opposite of the one our initial, seemingly plausible response would lead us to expect. That is to say, there seems to be evidence that suggests that people are in fact more wanton and slapdash in the way they handle their big decisions than in the way they handle their ordinary decisions.

I don't know whether this is really so: I do not know how conclusive, or perhaps merely impressionistic, the evidence regarding people's behavior in facing big decisions in general really is - and of course I am here most especially interested in the rather narrower group of cases I'm calling opting cases.

Be that as it may, however, we turn now to the second question posed above, viz. How rational ought opters to be. This is a normative question, which goes to the heart of the matter.

To begin with, from some responses I've sampled lately it appears that the idea that one ought to be rational about one's big life decisions strikes cer-

tain people not just as problematic but as simply *wrong*. These people feel that where a critical, life-determining decision is concerned, one ought (- at least beyond a certain point of initial fact-finding -) to be guided by one's instincts and gut reactions. The impression is almost created that by demanding rationality in the sphere of big decisions one in a sense belittles them, detracts from their significance. On this view it is only the temperamental, intuitive leap this way or that which does justice to the weight of the decision.

But still, consider now a person who faces an opting situation and who wants to opt rationally. We suppose then that this person is conscientious, fully informed and well aware of all the relevant aspects, external as well as internal, of the decision before him. This person, we suppose, will do all that he can to opt for that option which he believes more fully satisfies his comprehensive, internally consistent desires, given the consistent set of his beliefs - including of course his present beliefs about his own future states in each of the options open to him. Clearly, no one can do any better than that.

So consider now this admirable person some time after he'd opted. Given that opting involves core-affecting options, our opter is now, by hypothesis, a transformed person. In describing the nature of the transformation involved in opting, it will be recalled, it was not the changes in features like style of life, or standard of living, that was emphasized. Rather what was postulated as being affected was the core of one's sets of beliefs and desires. This means that in our opter some significant shifts, both cognitive and evaluative in nature, have taken place. And even though there is no reason to suppose that his present new sets of beliefs and desires should be internally inconsistent, still there are presumed to be discrepancies between the new and the old ones.

Now since the notion of rational action as presented above was relativized to and based upon the person's beliefs and desires, the following result is obtained: the transformation our opter had undergone affects his rationality base. The opting crossroad represents a point of discontinuity, or break, in the person's biography such that the basis for assessing what is rational for him to do beyond this point is a different one from the basis for the rationality assessment of his actions previous to that point. Somewhat schematically put, the opting situation is now revealed to be one in which a state involving one rationality base is to be exchanged for a state involving another.

This calls for some further elaboration.

In talking about one rationality base being exchanged for another, three possible levels have to be distinguished.

The upper-most level relates to the overarching principles, or canons, of rationality. It is rationality shifts on this level, for example, that Kuhn was

occupied with in his attempt to explicate the notion of a scientific revolution. There, a transition takes place from one paradigm, governed by its own canon of rationality, to another, possibly governed by a different canon of rationality. Kuhn's problem, then, is: »Can scientific revolutions be rational?« - This may be seen as an aspect of the more general question concerning the possibility of a rational conversion.

The ground-floor level has to do with shifts or changes over time in the agent's assignments of probabilities and utilities. These assignments enter into the calculation of what is rational for him to do, where the calculation is governed, say, by the familiar basic principle/canon of rational behavior telling the agent to maximize expected utility. Traditional decision theory was static in the sense that the agent's probabilities and utilities were either assumed to be considered at a given moment only, or were assumed to be constant over time. More recent developments, however, allow for changes in these assignments over time; following Jeffrey they generally go under the title of probability kinematics.⁴ I do not want to get into the details here. But it is important to realize that these developments assume that it ought to be possible to deduce the new assignments of the agent's degree of belief in all of his propositions from (a) his old assignments and (b) his new assignments for those specific propositions in which his change of belief originated, presumably as a result of some new experience or observation that he has had. This means that local shifts in an agent's belief function may effect a general shift in it, which of course enters directly into the rationality assessment of his future actions. But the crucial point is that this general shift is calculable and hence predictable, and that under this shift the structure of the old belief scheme is preserved.

But there is also an interim layer, between the level of the general principles of rationality and that of the concrete values assigned as input to the belief and desirability functions. This level concerns the make-up of these functions themselves, or, if you will, the mode of organizing and processing one's experiences and observations, the way one comes to assign values to one's beliefs and desires in the first place.

It is shifts at this level that are supposed to take place as a result of a big decision of the opting variety. In the new life options open to the agent, the belief and desirability value assignments of too many of his propositions are liable to be affected at once. At the same time the entire web of causal connections between them receives a jolt as well. The assumed change is thus supposed to go beyond a local one, under which the old structure is preserved and from which the overall new scheme can be deduced. When opting one is liable to undergo a transformation which may be viewed as something of a gestalt-switch. There will be shifts of the »figure-ground« type in the person's perception and partition of the world, and in his selective attention to signals which are to be interpreted as evidence.

What all this amounts to is this. Facing an opting situation the person knows that what is at stake is a decision between options each of which is likely to bring about a gestalt-switch-like transformation, affecting the overall nature of his belief and desirability assignments. He knows that, as a result, once embarked on his new life path, the rationality or irrationality of his future actions is likely to be assessed on a different basis from his present one - even though his canons of rationality need undergo no change at all. But as he faces the options there is no way for him to foretell what the new setup (»gestalt«) will be - or »feel« - like. The person knows *that* each option is liable to involve for him what is here termed a new rationality base, but he cannot know *which* it will be or *what* it will consist of.

This then brings us to the problem. How can a person rationally choose between options, each of which involves for him a new, unknown and unknowable rationality base, given that the best one can do is apply considerations from within the prison of his present rationality base? In short, can one opt rationally?

Now if the foregoing is coherent, and if indeed the problem I have tried to outline is a genuine one, then I believe a problem area has been located within the field of rational decision making. I submit, that is, that the notion of rational choice as commonly construed falls short of applying to cases of opting.

From what has been just said it ought not to be concluded, pessimistically, that people are inherently irrational when it comes to opting. Firstly, of course, there is the obvious point that in order to be irrational about something there must also be a rational way of going about it, and it is here the possible lack of such a rational way of going about opting that is the issue. Secondly, let us remind ourselves that in talking of rationality we often have three distinct notions in mind. We may mean 'rational' in the sense of optimal, or in the weaker sense of reasonable, or the yet weaker sense of non-mad. Now in presenting the opting challenge to the notion of rational choice it was employed in the sense of optimality. But we can easily be satisfied that even if the notion of rational choice in the sense of optimal choice falls short of applying to instances of opting, this does not imply that insofar as we are - sometimes - opters we must be - sometimes - mad.

And as to the possibility of opting reasonably, I think I had better leave this matter open. Except that I would like to allude briefly to what might be seen as a possible strategy a person may employ in an attempt to go about his opting situation reasonably.

In employing this strategy the person attempts to downgrade, as it were, the opting situation into an ordinary »middle-sized« decision situation. In practice this is likely to consist of breaking up the big step into several steps, none of which being a dramatic leap and each of which being reversible. Thus, if the decision to marry this man is to you a case of opting, you may try

to arrange for you to live together for a while so that you might get a foretaste of your future life - and of your future self - as his wife. Or again, if the contemplation of the offer of an academic chair in a country you've never been to is to you an opting situation, you may well try to negotiate first for a term of teaching there, and then possibly for a year's stay there with your family, before making the final decision, which by then you are likely not to see as an instance of opting any more.

That is to say, one way of resolving an opting situation is by consciously attempting to neutralize two of its main characteristics as an instance of opting, which are also the two heaviest psychological burdens of the opting situation: namely, its being a point of more or less dramatic discontinuity in one's life, and its involving a point of no return.

To be sure, this strategy of cutting the opting situation down to ordinary-decision size is not available in all instances of opting. But where it is available, I suggest that it is naturally resorted to and I submit that it is reasonably resorted to.



Let us enrich further the vocabulary we use for charting out the territory of big decisions by briefly introducing one more notion, the notion of *drifting*.

A person will be said to be drifting when he makes his big decisions conscious of their being decisions but not of their being at any point big. (This means dropping the second belief conjunct from the epistemic condition characterizing opting situations). That is, a drifting person carries on with the business of his life, making incremental, stepwise decisions only. It is only in retrospect that it can be seen how a certain series of such incremental steps turned out to have been all-important in determining the future shape of his life and the mode of his being.

In their book *Decision Making* (The free Press, 1977) Irving Janis and Leon Mann cite some observational reports regarding decision making on what they refer to as »such vital personal choices« as marriage and career done as succession of small decisions. They say: »Important life decisions are sometimes incremental in nature, the end product of a series of small decisions that progressively commit the person to one particular course of action. A stepwise increase in commitment can end up locking the person into a career or marriage without his ever having made a definite decision about it.« (p. 35) They also report a study indicating that »the careers of law-breakers are often arrived at in the same stepwise, drifting fashion, without any single stage at which the offenders decide they are going to pursue a life of crime.« (ibid.) The case of drug addiction may be added as another type of case in point.

In a somewhat different vein: the brief, ambiguous affair of Effie Briest with the Polish officer Major von Krampas may be seen as an instance of drifting, with catastrophic consequences Anna Karenina's liaison, on the other hand, seems to be more appropriately described in terms of her opting for it rather than having drifted into it.

It is possible that from an outside-spectator's point of view the real nature of the actor's decisions is apparent, but it is not necessary that this be so. Where a person proceeds as a drifter while an informed spectator would judge his situation as one calling for opting, I think that a case can sometimes be made for viewing the actor as engaged in self deception. The actor may be seen to be ignoring aspects of his decision situation which would reveal it for what it is: a first commitment leading down a core-affecting, irreversible road.

Let me end with a speculation.

I have spoken before of the mechanism of resolving an opting problem by dissolving it, or by »cutting it down« to ordinary-decision size. I have hinted just now at the phenomenon of self deception, which may be regarded as a mechanism for resolving an opting problem by pretending that it was an ordinary-size decision (or a series of such).

I have been silent about the more precarious idea that yet another way we may employ to extricate ourselves from an opting problem is by subtly arranging it to appear to us as a case which verges on conversion. That is, instead of labouring to construct the balance of reasons concerning the alternatives we face, we may sometimes channel our mental energies in such a way that one of the alternatives we face comes to loom as compelling and inevitable, overshadowing the other(s).

The speculation, then, is that we find pure, unmitigated opting situations difficult to deal with. We find it difficult to look them straight in the eye, as it were. The speculation also is that we may in fact be badly equipped to deal with opting situations. Infrequent, unique and totally demanding as they are from their very nature, we can hardly draw on past experience of our own, or on the experience of others, in resolving them.

And so, when an opting problem does thrust itself into our lives, we may find ourselves bemoaning the fact that we are mere rational animals and wishing that we possessed that elusive extra bit of super-rationality that could come to our aid. But then again, we might perhaps on the contrary find ourselves bemoaning our being the rational animals that we are and wishing that we were still closer to the instinctive, natural brutes; that we had more of (what William James calls) that »aboriginal marrow« in our bones which we imagine would solve our problems for us - or, indeed, would prevent us from ever having them in the first place.

Well, being neither natural brutes nor super-rational machines, all that is

left to us is to improve our understanding of our endowment of reason so as to be able to better steer the course of our lives.

Notes

- 1 Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser, »Picking and Choosing«, *Social Research*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 1977. To Sidney Morgenbesser I am privileged to acknowledge my debt of gratitude not just for that past work, but also for the conversations we had last summer in Jerusalem in which some of what follows originated.
- 2 Although one tends to associate >conversion< primarily with religious conversions, the term is by no means restricted to this phenomenon. There is, first, what Starbuck terms >counter-conversion<, where one converts *away* from religion. Also, » ... it may be from moral scrupulosity into freedom and license; or it may be produced by the irruption into the individual's life of some new stimulus or passion, such as love, ambition, cupidity, revenge or patriotic devotion.« (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Collin: The Fontana Library, 1960 (1901-2), p. 181. See also his case histories of some non-religious conversions, on pp. 183-185.) Pertinent too are conversions into, and away from, communism.
- 3 Jon Ester, »The Nature and Scope of Rational-Choice Explanation.« To appear in E. Lepore and B. McLaughlin (eds.), *A Companion to Actions and Events: Essays in Honor of Donald Davidson*.
- 4 See Richard C. Jeffrey, *The Logic of Decision*, 2nd edition, University of Chicago Press, 1983 (1965), Chapter 11 and the reference to the pertinent literature at 11.11 (Probability kinematics is supposed to comprise the so-called conditionalization as a limiting case. See Jeffrey, p. 171.)