

Big Decisions: Opting, Converting, Drifting*

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I. Big, Small and Medium

I want to focus on some of the limits of decision theory that are of interest to the philosophical concern with practical reasoning and rational choice. These limits should also be of interest to the social-scientists' concern with Rational Choice.

Let me start with an analogy. Classical Newtonian physics holds good and valid for middle-sized objects, but not for the phenomena of the very little, micro, sub-atomic level or the very large, macro, outer-space level: different theories, concepts and laws apply there. Similarly, I suggest that we might think of the theory of decision-making as relating to middle-sized, ordinary decisions, and to them only. There remain the two extremes, the very 'small' decisions on the one hand and the very 'big' decisions on the other. These may pose a challenge to the ordinary decision theory and may consequently require a separate treatment.

By 'small' decisions, I have in mind cases where we are strictly indifferent with regard to the alternatives before us, where our preferences over the alternatives are completely symmetrical. Every time I pick a bottle of Coke or a can of Campbell soup from the shelves of the supermarket, I have made a small decision in this sense. To the extent that we take choosing to be choosing for a reason, and choosing for a reason to presuppose preferences, it looks like we have to conclude that in such cases rational choice is precluded. 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 such cases of choice without preference, referring to them as instances of picking rather than

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choosing.¹ My present topic however is not the picking end of the scale but its other end, that of big decisions. More precisely, I am interested in a somewhat narrower subset of decisions within the large class of what might strike us as ‘big’ decisions. These will be, roughly, decisions that are personal and transformative, decisions that one takes at major crossroads of one’s life. I exclude from this discussion the big decisions one may take in virtue of one’s official position or institutional role, which primarily affect the lives of others; for example, a statesman’s decision to go to war or to drop an A-bomb.

II. Big Decisions Characterized

I shall consider a decision ‘big’ in the sense I am here concerned to explore if it exhibits the following four characteristics:

- it is transformative, or ‘core affecting’;
- it is irrevocable;
- it is taken in full awareness;
- the choice not made casts a lingering shadow.

I shall refer to decisions exhibiting these characteristics as cases of *opting*. Decisions such as whether to marry, to migrate, or to leave the corporate world in order to become an artist, might be examples. Whether or not these cases do indeed qualify as cases of opting is a question I shall leave for later. First, I need to spell out the characteristic features in more detail.

The first feature of a case of opting is that it is a *big* decision in that it is likely to transform one’s future self in a significant way. When facing an opting situation one stands at a critical juncture in one’s life. The choice one makes alters one’s life project and inner core. Now the expressions ‘future self’, ‘life project’, and ‘inner core’, may be helpfully suggestive but they are too broad and vague. For the notion of opting to be useful, I shall have to be more precise. So let us think of cases of opting as cases in which the choice one makes is likely to change one’s beliefs and desires (or ‘utilities’); that is, to change one’s cognitive and evaluative systems. Inasmuch as our beliefs and desires shape the core of what we are

¹ Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser, ‘Picking and Choosing’, *Social Research* Vol. 44, No. 4, (1977). I should like to dedicate this essay to Sidney’s memory, who passed away August 1, 2004.

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as rational decision makers, we may say that one emerges from an opting situation a different person.

To be sure, there is a sense in which every choice changes us somewhat. The accumulation of these incremental changes makes us change, sometimes even transform, as life goes on and as we grow older. But what I am here calling attention to are the instances in which there is a point of sharp discontinuity. In these instances a person's inner core of beliefs and desires does not simply gradually evolve but undergoes, instead, an abrupt transformation.

Note that sometimes a critical juncture, a point of discontinuity and transformation may occur not as an instance of opting. I am thinking here of results of external happenings. Think of the possible transformative effect on one's life of an accident, the death of someone close, the collapse of the stock market, a draft to serve in a war, and so on. Such cases do not concern us here.

The second characteristic feature of opting situations is their irrevocability: they are points of no return. Again, in a strict, literal sense, every decision is irreversible; 'what's done cannot be undone'.² We can apologize for words but they cannot be literally unsaid, we can lower the arm we raised but we cannot un-raise it, a move we make we can retract but not un-make. Yet we treat a great many of our deeds, in a rather straightforward sense, as not irreversible: we compensate, return, or retreat. Various devices are available to us for restoring the situation to the way it was prior to our action or at any rate to a state of affairs sufficiently similar, close or equivalent to it. To be sure, the restoration may be costly in terms of time, money, effort or emotional outlay, but restoration it nevertheless is. So when I say that opting situations constitute points of no return I intend to mark these cases as different. When one opts, one is embarking upon a road that is one way only, leaving burning bridges behind. A reversal in the ordinary sense is impossible.

The next item on the list of characteristic features of opting situations is the element of awareness. It is constitutive of the opting situation that the person facing it 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 the person concerned also perceives it as such. We may put this more precisely in terms of two epistemic conditions: in an opting situation the person believes (a) that he or she must make a genuine choice between viable alternatives, and (b) that the decision they are called upon to make

² Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 1.

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is 'big'—transformative 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* (when (a) is dropped) or of *drifting* (when (b) is dropped). But this is already jumping ahead.

The fourth and last feature is perhaps only a derivative of the first three. Yet it deserves separate treatment. It concerns the shadow presence of the rejected option; the ghost of the Road Not Taken.

Let me explain. In an ordinary choice situation there is a set of alternatives from which the person chooses one. Upon his or her decision, the non-chosen members of this set ordinarily cease to exist as far as the decision makers are concerned. In the case of opting, however, the rejected, un-opted-for option characteristically maintains a sort of lingering presence. In other words, I suggest that what is of significance to the opting person's account of his or her own life is not only the option they have taken, but also the one they have rejected: the person one did not marry, the country one did not emigrate to, the career one did not pursue. The rejected option enters in an essential way into the person's description of his or her life. The shadow presence maintained by the rejected option may constitute a yardstick by which this person evaluates the worth, success or meaning of his or her life.

III. Big Decisions Illustrated

Having described the opting situation, we must now ask, are there instances of opting situations? I mentioned earlier decisions such as whether to marry or to migrate. Think, for example, of the decision whether to have children or to quit one's job as a Director General of a high-tech company to become a Buddhist monk. Or, think of a young talented person who faces a choice between a career as a concert pianist and as a nuclear physicist.

Consider some famous cases. King Edward VIII made the agonizing decision to leave the throne 'for the sake of the woman he loved'. The early socialist Zionist pioneers in the 1920s left everything behind—home, family, religion—and came to Palestine in order to become the New Jews of their ideals. Many defected from the East-bloc countries to the West before 1989. The Biblical Ruth chose 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.

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So, are these cases examples of opting? I offer them at this point as tentative illustrations of the concept. They indicate the flavour of the big decisions here under consideration—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 couple of points may be extracted from the suggested examples as they stand. First, in contrast to ordinary decision situations, opting situations are extraordinary. It is possible to go through life with only few opting occasions, even with none at all. While extraordinary, however, opting instances need not be thought of as abnormal, perverse or pathological. Anyone interested in human decision-making cannot therefore be justified in ignoring them, thinking that they lie outside the realm of ‘normal’ decision-making.

Second, a distinction may be called for between what can 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, that is the new life option, and the No, that is the continuation of one’s life in its present path (which may nevertheless not be quite what it was before, owing to the shadow presence of the Yes option).

IV. Opting vs. Converting

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

To approach an answer to these questions, consider two further instances. When Tolstoy made his final move to live as a peasant among his fellow Russian peasants, was he opting? When the Apostles left their families and possessions behind to join Jesus of Nazareth, were they opting? I suggest that there is a thin but significant line dividing the cases of opting as here conceived, from cases of *conversion experiences*.

The Conversion experience is familiar to us—from literature, from history, and from life.³ Like cases of opting, converting can be

³ 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, ‘[I]t may be from moral scrupulosity into freedom and license; or it may be produced by the irruption into the

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about a life-transforming, core-affecting, often irrevocable move. Also, instances of conversion are often dramatic. In converting, like in opting, one is aware that one is about to change one's life in a significant way. But in the conversion experiences I here call attention to it is not the case that one believes that one must make a genuine decision between two viable alternatives. From the point of view of the convert, he or she has no choice in the matter; typically, they would have a strong sense of compulsion, 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 opting (Yes, No) cases, the rejected option being the continuation on the path of one's previous life. Typically, the person who has undergone conversion rejects his or her previous life not just in a technical sense, because they now adopt a new form of life, but also normatively. Converts view their previous lives in a negative light; they evaluate them as wicked or sinful.

I have mentioned two points of difference between converting and opting: the perception of the juncture point as something other than a genuine decision situation; and the negative evaluation of one's previous life. We can readily see that both of these points are perspective oriented. They have to do with the way the people concerned see their situation. In other words, from the point of view of an outside spectator there can in fact be much similarity between cases of opting and of converting, even though from the point of view of the actors they are quite dissimilar.

This explains why I was tentative about the examples. Whether a given instance is one resulting from a big decision—'opting'—or from a conversion experience is a question that cannot be settled by a mere labeling of the act, say, as an act of defection or immigration (etc.). We need to know more. Some opting-seeming situations, including marriage, might be converting situations instead. Conversely, some converting-seeming situations might be cases of opting: 'conversion' to, and away from, communism may be cases

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), 181. See also James's case histories of some non-religious conversions, 183–185.) Pertinent too are conversions into, and away from, communism.

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in point (Whittaker Chambers, Arthur Koestler).⁴ As for Tolstoy or the Apostles, upon a closer look they are indeed likelier to turn out converts than opters.

An evocative image for the difference between an opting situation and a conversion experience is provided by the contrast between Paul of Tarsus on the road (to Damascus) and Heracles on the crossroad (between Vice and Virtue). St. Paul's powerful conversion serves as my paradigm of what I refer to as a conversion experience. It occurs when he goes to the city of Damascus to arrest Christians and bring them to punishment in Jerusalem. As he drew near to the city '... suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice ...', (*Acts ix*, 3–9). Eventually he repents of his sins, is baptized and arises to walk in the 'newness of life'. There is no decision in Paul's case: blinded by the light of the compelling new truth, he feels ordered into his transformed life. He regards his old self as an enemy of his new.

Heracles, in contrast, is described as 'debating with himself which of the two paths he should pursue, the path of virtue or of vice'. Two women personify for him the two options. Each of them tries to entice him—and the language is one of decision throughout. Vice speaks first: 'I see you, Heracles, in doubt and difficulty what path of life to choose; make me your friend and I will lead you to the pleasantest road and easiest.' Then Virtue speaks: '... I entertain good hope that if you choose the path which leads to me, you shall ...' Heracles is portrayed as facing a genuine choice and he knows that it is a one way road; there will be no way back.⁵

Note however that cases of formal or technical religious conversion need not be cases of a conversion experience as delineated here. At times, they may count as quite 'normal' decisions, and occasionally as cases of big decisions of the opting variety. What I have in mind for example are the numerous instances of Jews who have converted to Christianity in order to

⁴ Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Regnery Publishing, 1952); Arthur Koestler's essay in *The God That Failed*, R. H. Crossman (ed.) (1951) and his three-volume autobiography, *Arrow in the Blue* (1952), *The Invisible Writing* (1954), and *Janus: A Summing Up* (1978).

⁵ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* (Book II, ch. 1, 21–34). The plot is based upon a lost parable of Prodicus of Ceos (a Sophist contemporary of Socrates), *The Choice of Heracles*. In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon has Socrates relate a paraphrase of the lost parable to Arisrtippus. (J. S. Bach bases his secular Cantata BWV 213, 'Herkules auf dem Scheidewege', on this material.)

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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 then is that not every case of an exchange of one religion for another is a case of a conversion experience in the sense here employed, so dramatically illustrated by St. Paul (or Ratisbonne).

Pascal's argument known as the Wager is an interesting case in point. It is an argument designed to convince non-believers to choose the Catholic faith through a deliberative-calculative process of decision-making, not by relying on being swept by a conversion experience.

V. The Rationality of Big Decisions

I have alluded to a contrast between deliberation-related opting on the one hand and a conversion experience on the other. What is behind this contrast?

In the case of opting, there is deliberation and there is an expectation that reason prevail. I shall presently examine this expectation and question it. In the case of a conversion experience, in contrast, there is no such expectation. The phenomenon of opting is supposed to be continuous with the realm of human decision-making or practical deliberation. A conversion experience, in contrast, lies outside this realm.

In saying that opting is expected to be guided by reasons what is meant is that opters are expected to arrive at their decision in much the same way that they arrive at their ordinary, 'smaller' decisions. This in turn means that cases of opting are supposed to be open to rational-choice explanations. An ideal explanation of an action as an expression of rational choice strives to show that the action is the best way of satisfying the full set of the person's desires, given his or her set of beliefs formed on the basis of the (optimal amount of) evidence at their disposal. In addition, the further standard requirement is added that the person's sets of beliefs and of desires be internally consistent.⁶

To return to the question of the rationality of opting cases: opters are expected not only to act rationally but even super-rationally, as it were. They are expected to be more rational about

⁶ I follow here the formulation of Jon Elster in 'The Nature and Scope of Rational-Choice Explanation', in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson: Perspectives on Actions and Events*, E. Lepore and B. McLaughlin (eds.) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

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their opting decisions than about their ordinary decisions, simply because there is so much more at stake. This means that one would expect the opters to take extra time and care in amassing relevant information as their evidence base, to exercise extra caution in assessing the alternatives open to them—including their probabilities—and in bringing their own set of desires (valuations, inclinations, aspirations) to bear upon them, and so on. In short, one would expect an act of opting to be an exemplary candidate for the ideal rational-choice explanations just delineated.

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

These are two distinct questions. The first question is empirical, the second normative. Of the first, I have little to say. There is some evidence that the attitude of people toward their big decisions is quite the opposite of the one that we might expect. That is to say, evidence seems to suggest that people are in fact more casual and cavalier in the way they handle their big decisions than in the way they handle their ordinary decisions.⁷

The normative question, how rational ought opters to be, goes to the heart of the matter. Let me begin with an (empirical) observation about how people tend to react to this question. It appears that the idea that one ought to be rational about one's big life decisions strikes some people as troublesome, even wrong. There is a view that with big decisions one ought to be guided by one's instincts, to go 'by one's gut'. The demand for cost-benefit analysis or a decisional balance sheet in the sphere of big decisions seems to some people to belittle these decisions in some sense and to detract from their significance.⁸ On this view, it is only the

⁷ Regarding the ways people handle their big financial decisions, for example their retirement plans, see Cass R. Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler, 'Libertarian Paternalism Is Not An Oxymoron'. AEI-Brookings Joint Center Working Paper No. 03-2; U. Chicago, Public Law Working Paper No. 43; U. Chicago Law & Economics, Olin Working Paper No. 185.

⁸ For a well-known taxonomy of decision strategies for coping under stress, time pressure, and risk see Janis, I. L. & Mann, L.: *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice and Commitment* (Free Press, MacMillan, 1977); it includes a decisional balance sheet.

In 'Feeling and Thinking' (*American Psychologist*, 1980, footnote 6), R. B. Zajonc underlines the role of affect in decision-making. He describes how, in trying to decide whether to accept a position at another university, Phoebe Ellsworth said, 'I get half way through my Irv Janis balance sheet and say: Oh, hell, it's not coming out right! Have to find a way to get some

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temperamental, intuitive leap, a ‘naked act of decision’ as it were, that does justice to the weight of the decision.⁹

Economists, on the other hand, care little about the phenomenology of peoples’ attitudes to their decisions. Theirs is a world-view of revealed preferences, and as long as people exhibit consistency in their choices it does not much matter, from the standpoint of rationality, whether the choice was intuitive or resulted from a calculative deliberation. As we shall see, however, it is the notion of consistency that is challenged by the cases of big decisions of the opting variety.

Let us consider people who face opting situations and who want to opt rationally. We suppose that they are conscientious, fully informed and well aware of all the relevant aspects, external as well as internal, of the decision before them. We suppose that they want to choose that option which they believe more fully satisfies their comprehensive, internally consistent desires, given the consistent set of their beliefs—including of course their present beliefs about their own future states in each of the options open to them.

Think for example of a high-tech executive who, craving spirituality, considers opting for a life as a Buddhist monk. We imagine him to want the isolation, simplicity, peace of mind and closeness to nature that (he believes) characterize the life of Buddhist monks. He will seek every piece of information relevant to his decision—about the lives of Buddhist monks, about the process of becoming one, etc. He may even be able to assess his

pluses over on the other side!’ (I am indebted to Thomas Schelling for this quote.) A recent report of four studies on consumer choice indicates that it is not always advantageous to engage in thorough deliberation before choosing. The scientists’ new advice for anyone who is struggling to make a difficult decision is, Stop thinking about it and, when the time comes to decide, go with what feels right. See: Ap Dijksterhuis, Maarten W. Bos, Loran F. Nordgren, Rick B. van Baaren, ‘On Making the Right Choice: The Deliberation-Without-Attention Effect’, *Science* **17** (February) Vol. 311, No. 5763, 2006 1005-1007.

⁹ Consider ‘A Psychological Tip’, a poem by Piet Hein, from *Grooks* (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1982), 38: ‘Whenever you’re called on to make up you mind / And you’re happered by not having any, / The best way to solve the dilemma, you’ll find / Is simply by spinning a penny. / No—not so that chance shall decide the affair / While you’re passively standing there moping / But the moment the penny is up in the air, / You suddenly know what you’re hoping.’ (I am indebted to Thomas Schelling for this quote too.)

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probability of success in achieving the transition and becoming the person he wants to be. As we picture him, he has, in addition to his beliefs and desires, second-order preferences as well, about the sort of person he wants to be. Being materialistic, he may prefer to have ascetic and spiritual preferences; being sex-minded, he may prefer to be a person who prefers abstention.

Now we want to consider what it means for this person to make an optimal choice, relative to his present beliefs and desires. Whose ends is he aiming to promote? Is the opter trying to promote the ends of Old Person or of New Person? The reason for casting doubt about the nature of the optimizing is that, once he opts, Old Person undergoes a personality transformation: there is no continuity in his personality identity and so there is also a problem about his being consistent in his choices.¹⁰

New Person is now, by hypothesis, a transformed person. Opting transforms the sets of one's core beliefs and desires. A significant personality shift takes place in our opter, a shift that alters his cognitive as well as evaluative systems. New Person's new sets of beliefs and desires may well be internally consistent but the point about the transformation is that inconsistency now exists between New Person's system of beliefs and desires, taken as a whole, and Old Person's system taken as a whole. I am not questioning his ability to actually make a choice, or his ability subsequently to assess himself as happy (or unhappy) with his choice. The question I am raising is whether it is possible to assess the rationality of his choice, given that this choice straddles two discontinuous personalities with two different rationality bases.

So: rational action is relative to the person's beliefs and desires, and the person's beliefs and desires constitute the basis against which the rationality of that person's actions is assessed. Therefore, the transformation our opter undergoes affects his or her rationality

¹⁰ I was told of a person who hesitated to have children because he did not want to become the 'boring type' that all his friends became after they had children. Finally, he did decide to have a child and, with time, he did adopt the boring characteristics of his parent friends—but he was happy! I suppose second order preferences are crucial to the way we are to make sense of this story. As Old Person, he did not approve of the personality he knew he would become if he has children: his preferences were not to have New Person's preferences. As New Person, however, not only did he acquire the predicted new set of preferences, he also seems to have approved of himself having them. How are we to assess the question whether he opted 'right'? Who is asking? Who is answering, and on whose behalf?

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base. The opting juncture is a point of discontinuity, or break, in the opters' biography and personality and so the basis for assessing what is rational for them to do beyond this point is different from the basis for the rationality assessment of their actions prior to that point. The personality-transforming opting situation is one in which the old 'rationality base' is replaced by a new. And yet, the rationality of decision-making and of choice is predicated on the continuity of personality identity over time.¹¹

Can we not describe this situation within the familiar framework of decision under uncertainty? In a sense we can, but we have to be clearer about the uncertainty that is involved here. In the opting situation it is not the future states of the world or their probabilities that one does not know but rather one's future personality. Opting is a gamble on one's future self as a transformed assessor of results and assigner of probabilities. Cases of opting involve the opting persons' explicit or implicit second-order preference for a radical change in their set of first-order preferences. These are cases, in other words, in which people have second-order preferences over their future selves: they want to transform themselves. Given the discontinuity in the opting person's set of preferences, can one make sense of such a decision from a rational-choice perspective? If acting rationally is optimizing, can one opt optimally?

VI. Opting Reasonably

From what I said so far, one should not conclude that when it comes to opting people are intrinsically irrational: it is not even clear what it would mean to say this. In order to be irrational about something there must also be a rational way of going about it, and the rational way of going about opting is what I am here questioning. A satisfying post-opting life is no indication of the rationality, or otherwise, of the big decision involved.

'Acting rationally' need not mean optimizing; it can also mean acting reasonably. What would it take for one to opt reasonably?

Consider a strategy people may employ in an attempt to opt reasonably: they may attempt to cut down, as it were, the opting

¹¹ The best known philosophical discussion of the connection between rationality and the idea of stability of personal identity over time is Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1986), chapter XIV. However, he speaks of personal identity whereas I prefer to speak of personality identity.

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situation into a series of ordinary ‘middle-sized’ decision situations. In practice, this means breaking up the big step into several steps, none of which is a dramatic leap and each of which is reversible. Small steps can be helpful. In particular, by taking small consecutive steps we can assure the continuity of our personality identity over time.

Thus, if the big decision you face is whether to marry this man or not, you may try to arrange for the two of you to live together for a while so that you can get a foretaste of your future life—and of your future self—as his wife. Or if the offer of an academic position in a country you have never been to is to you an opting situation, you may try to negotiate first for a term of teaching there, and subsequently perhaps for a year’s stay in that place with your family. When the time comes for you to make your final decision, you are likely no longer to consider the last step in this series of steps as an instance of opting.¹²

That is to say, a way of resolving an opting situation is by consciously attempting to neutralize two of the characteristics that make it an instance of opting, namely, that it is a point of discontinuity in one’s life, and that it involves a point of no return. These two characteristics also account for the heavy psychological burden that the opting situation imposes. Not all instances of opting may lend themselves to the application of the strategy of cutting down the opting situation to ordinary-decision size. Some cases really call for leaping across an abyss: such a jump cannot be done in small steps. But where this strategy is available I believe that it is natural, as well as reasonable, to resort to it.

VII. Opting vs. Drifting

I shall now further enrich the vocabulary of big decisions by introducing the notion of *drifting*. One will be said to drift when making one’s big decisions conscious of their being decisions but not of their being big. A drifting person carries on with the business of his or her life, making incremental, stepwise decisions only. It is only in retrospect that it can be seen how a particular

¹² For more on the small-step strategy see Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Cass R. Sunstein, ‘Second-Order Decisions’, *Ethics* **110** (October 1999), 5–31. (Reprinted in: Cass R. Sunstein, *Behavioral Law and Economics*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, chapter 7, 187–298.)

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series of such incremental steps—or in particular one step among them—had been all-important in transforming the future shape of their life and of their personality.

Consider this observation by Janis and Mann: ‘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.’¹³ Janis and Mann 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.*) I think that the brief, ambiguous love affair of Fontane’s Effie Briest with the Polish officer Major von Krampas is an instance of drifting, with catastrophic consequences. In contrast, Anna Karenina’s liaison is surely not a case of drifting, but I leave open the question whether or not she was an opter.

It is possible that from an outside-spectator’s point of view the real nature of the actor’s decisions is clear. It is possible for a person to proceed as a drifter while an informed spectator would judge that the person’s situation is one of opting. When this happens, I think that we can view the actor as engaged in self-deception. The actor may be ignoring aspects of his or her decision situation, which reveal it for what it is: a first commitment leading down a core-transforming, irreversible road.

By now, I have identified a number of techniques for extricating ourselves from an opting situation. One is the mechanism of resolving an opting problem by dissolving it, or by ‘cutting it down’ to ordinary-decision size—the small-step strategy. Another is the phenomenon of self-deception, which we may regard as a mechanism for resolving an opting problem by pretending that it was an ordinary-size decision (or a series of such). Yet another way to extricate ourselves from an opting problem is by subtly arranging it to appear to us as if it were a case of conversion. That is, we may be channeling our mental energies to make one of these alternatives appear as a compelling and inevitable *force majeure*.

I speculate 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,

¹³ Janis, I. L. & Mann, L. *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice and Commitment*, 1977 (see note 8 above), 35.

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exceptional and all-encompassing as they are, we can hardly draw on our own past experience or on the experience of others in resolving them.¹⁴ We recognize, as theorists, that big decisions test the limits of rational decision theory while we try, as practitioners, to extricate ourselves from them as best we can.

VIII. Opting, Picking and the Absurd

I started with a distinction between the realm of decisions without preferences—picking, and the realm of ‘big’ decisions—opting. I want to close with a suggestion that at the deepest level of choice, picking and opting meet.

One chooses for reasons; one picks when reasons cannot prevail. This happens when the alternatives are entirely symmetrical (or incommensurate). But reasons also fail to prevail when we come to the very end of the chain of reasons, when we run out of reasons altogether. If you choose to do X for reason A and, asked to justify A, you cite B and then you give C as your reason for B and so on, you eventually reach the very bottom, the substratum of all your reasons. If reasons are forever from within a system or a framework (Wittgenstein: from within a ‘language game’), the choice of the framework itself cannot be justified by appeal to reasons.

You cannot justify deduction, because there is no way to do it non-deductively. The choice to be moral cannot be justified by appeal to moral reasons. These fundamental choices, then, cannot really be choices; so are they instances of picking? These are after all the biggest, in the sense of weightiest, decisions we may ever have to make.

I believe that a similar intuition underlies Kant’s position about the free yet ultimately inscrutable act of choice (*‘Wilkuer’*) to adhere to the maxim of the universal moral law.¹⁵ I also believe that an intuition like this underlies the understanding of the absurd in

¹⁴ Marrying may be an infrequent experience in the lives of each one of us but, seen globally, it is a frequent event: most people marry, at least once. Big decisions may therefore be discussed very differently—from an institutional rather than from a personal perspective. It is possible, for example, to think of incentives and institutional designs that could encourage people to make their big decisions come out in a particular way, for example to reinforce their decision to follow the path of Mother Theresa or to become a legal service lawyer instead of a corporate lawyer.

¹⁵ See Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (New York: Cambridge university Press, 1996 (1993)), 362–4.

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the writings of Karl Schmidt and of the Existentialist thinkers, notably Heidegger and Sartre. At bottom, we make our most fundamental choices of the canons of morality, logic and rationality in total freedom and without appeal to reasons. They embody acts that this literature variously describes as nihilist, absurd, or leaps (of faith). The Existentialist thinkers hold that as mature adults we can step outside ourselves as it were, to find the Archimedian point from which to make the brute act of unreasoned choice of a way of life. It may be, then, that the notions of picking and opting finally meet, on the level of these profound existential decisions.