The notion of reasoned choice is central to most discussions of decision and action. It is usually anchored, in the more formal of these discussions, in a binary relation of preference over alternatives. The preference relation being but a partial ordering, however, it is quite standardly augmented by the equivalence relation of indifference to render it complete. This, then, is where the notion of indifference enters the picture—and this is usually where it is left: as merely subservient to the notion of preference, as a mere device in virtue of which the latter is made amenable to satisfactory systematization. But does it deserve to be left there?

This paper raises some philosophical questions that may be asked about the notion of indifference and attempts to answer some of them. It is a plea not to be indifferent to indifference.

Choosing, Picking, Selecting

We speak of choosing among alternatives when the act of taking (doing) one of them is determined by the differences in one's preferences over them. When preferences are completely symmetrical, where one is strictly indifferent with regard to the alternatives, we shall refer to the act of taking (doing) one of them as an act of picking. We adopt the term selection as the generic term, neutral with respect to choosing and picking.

More precisely, a simple picking situation will be a selection
situation with the alternatives A and B such that: (i) the agent cannot select both A and B ("cannot" being construed as deontic prohibition, practical impossibility, or whatever); (ii) the agent is indifferent between A and B; (iii) the agent prefers the selection of either A or B, whichever it may be, to the selection of neither: one—or the other—is better for him than none.

Given this characterization, statements like Leibniz's "In things which are absolutely indifferent there can be no choice . . . since choice must have some reason or principle,"\(^1\) or Collingwood's "Choice is choice between alternatives, and . . . one must in some way present itself as more attractive than the other, or it cannot be chosen,"\(^2\) become analytically true. Choosing is choosing for a reason, and this presupposes preference. However, to the extent that, through equating "choice" with (our generic) "selection," these statements purport to deny the existence of selection situations without preference—or indeed to deny the possibility of picking—this paper aims to render them doubtful, if not downright wrong.

As an example, consider the story attributed to Algazel (al-Ghazali) about the hungry man in front of whom are put two dates that are equally distant from him, equally accessible to him, and are completely alike in size, shape, and color, in beauty and in freshness. If the man is allowed only one of the dates, he cannot possibly choose since by assumption there is nothing in respect of which one of them is preferable. This is an earlier version of the much more famous story about Buridan's ass who, according to some,\(^3\) is destined to starve to

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\(^3\) As some of the more striking examples, consider the following passages: "Between two foods, distant and moving in like measure, a man being free would die of hunger, before he should bring one to his teeth" (Dante Alighieri, *The Paradise*, edited with translation and notes by Arthur John Butler [London: Macmillan, 1885], p. 38); "And who should place us between a Bottle of wine, and a Gammon of Bacon, with an
death owing to there being no ground on which to prefer one bale of hay over the other, and thus to there being no possibility of choice between them.

In view of the perplexities of this situation a recurrent line of reasoning throughout the historical discussions relating to the problem of Buridan's ass maintained that no situation of completely symmetrical preferences is feasible. Furthermore, if in a situation which appears to be one of strictly indifferent preferences a selection of one of the alternatives is as a matter of fact made, this only proves, on this view, that the given situation was after all not one of completely symmetrical preferences. Thus Montaigne says:

... nothing is presented unto us, wherein there is not some difference, how light so ever it bee: And that either to the sight, or to the feeling, there is ever some chosie, which tempteth and drawes us to it, though imperceptible and not to bee distinguyished.4

And according to Leibniz:

There is never any indifference of equipoise. . . . There will therefore always be many things in the ass and outside the ass,
equall appetite to eat and drinke, doublesse there were noe remedy, but to die of thirst and of hunger" (Michel Equem de Montaigne, Essays, translated by John Florio, 9 vols. [London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1965], 2: 333); “I say that I entirely grant that if a man were placed in such a state of equilibrium [like the ass of Buridanus] he would perish of hunger and thirst, supposing he perceived nothing but hunger and thirst, and the food and drink which were equidistant from him. If you ask me whether such a man would not be thought an ass rather than a man, I reply that I do not know” (Benedict de Spinoza, Ethics, translated by W. Hale White, revised by Amelia Hutchinson Stirling, 4th ed. [London: Oxford University Press, 1937], p. 102).

Buridan's own position on this matter, incidentally, is not known. In fact, the story about the ass is not to be found in his writings. Thomas Reid's editor, Sir William Hamilton, offers this comment as a note to a passage by Reid mentioning the problem of Buridan's ass (the passage itself is quoted in n. 14, below): “The supposition of the ass, etc. is not, however, as I have ascertained to be found in his writings. Perhaps it was orally advanced in disputation, or in lecturing, as an example in illustration of his Determinism; perhaps it was employed by his opponents as an instance to reduce that doctrine to absurdity” (Thomas Reid, The Works of Thomas Reid, D. D., preface, notes and supplementary dissertations by Sir William Hamilton, Bart., 4th ed. [Edinburgh: MacLachlan & Steward, 1854], p. 238).

4 Montaigne, Essays, 2: 333.
although they may not be apparent to us, which will determine him to go to one side rather than the other.\textsuperscript{5}

A somewhat weaker version of this position maintains that while selection situations with completely symmetrical preferences are possible, and thus present a genuine theoretical problem, they are not of any practical interest: “We are,” says Rescher, “rarely in real-life situations confronted with strictly indifferent choices.”\textsuperscript{6} Even those who acknowledge the feasibility of such situations are hard put to produce convincing examples. The only good example, as well as the most popular one, seems to have been that of a selection situation involving a number of coins (or new dollar bills) any one of which will answer both the buyer’s and the seller’s purposes equally well.\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{Are There Genuine Picking Situations?}

Questions crowd in: Are there picking situations—and if so are they rare and inconsequential or rather pervasive and possibly revealing of our social or human situation? Are picking situations always transformable into choosing ones?

\textsuperscript{5} Leibniz, \textit{Theodicy}, secs. 46–49.

\textsuperscript{6} Nicholas Rescher, “Choice without Preference,” \textit{Kant Studien} 51 (1959–60): 143. We want to acknowledge our debt to Rescher’s paper, from which we drew most of the references to the traditional writings on the problem of Buridan’s ass.

\textsuperscript{7} Compare: “. . . whence the election of two indifferent things commeth into our soule (and which causeth, that from out a great number of Crownes or Angells we rather take one than another, when there is no reason to induc\textsuperscript{c} us to preferre any one before others)” (Montaigne, \textit{Essays}, 2: 333); “. . . for surely a man who has occasion to lay out a shilling, or a guinea, may have two hundred that are of equal value, both to the giver and to the receiver, any one of which will answer his purpose equally well” (Reid, \textit{Works}, p. 609); “Such situations [of strictly indifferent choice] do however appear to exist. For example, if a person were offered a choice between two fresh dollar bills, the only perceptible difference between which is a difference in serial numbers, we would be greatly astonished if this selector could offer us a ‘reason’ for choosing one of them rather than the other, which could reasonably be regarded as valid. While a difference between the bills does indeed exist, it simply does not constitute a valid difference as regards their preferability as objects of choice” (Rescher, “Choice without Preference,” p. 143).
If not, how do we pick and can we do so reasonably? Is the evidence for picking incompatible with well-entrenched lawful sentences or with apparent conceptual truths? There are many more, and we begin by asking: Are there genuine picking situations?

Our answer to this question is a firm yes; moreover, we maintain that they are numerous rather than rare. Supermarket shelves supply us with paradigmatic examples of social picking situations proper.8

To be sure, given the variety of products on display and given your preferences, you may choose to get a can of soup. You may, further, choose to get tomato rather than mushroom soup, and you may, if you are particular about such matters, choose to get Campbell's tomato soup rather than Heinz's. But we hold that usually you cannot, and as a matter of fact do not, choose the can you end up throwing into the carriage: you pick it. That is, if it is the case—as it usually is—that, having eliminated from among the rows upon rows of Campbell tomato soup cans the less conveniently accessible ones as well as the conspicuously damaged ones, you are still facing at least two cans neither of which is discernibly superior to the other(s), then you are in a picking situation, willy-nilly.

This is not to deny, of course, that there may be differences among the cans, even differences which could make a difference. Thus a scientific weighing of the contents of the cans may yield that one of them was slightly fuller, or a careful

8 A picking situation is social if A arranges it for B. Often when a person arranges a selection situation he may not know whether he is arranging a picking or a choosing one. Thus the more food and drink our generous hosts offer us, the more choices they may believe they are making possible for us—but then the more confusion or indifference they may in fact be introducing. (See the remarks below on the taxonomy of selection situations according to types of personality.) We are assuming here that the guests are constrained to select some food or other; this indeed is how we propose to construe component (iii) in the description of picking situations given above. When this constraint is lifted, the description of the situation is no longer apparent. A man goes into a supermarket, sees two or more types of soup, pauses a while, then leaves. Did he pick to leave? Or did his initial preference for soup over no-soup give way to a more “fundamental” kind of preference—to evade the selection situation altogether rather than face a picking situation?
examination of the inside of the cans may reveal that one of them was rustier than the others, etc. The point, however, is that as far as the ordinary consumer in the ordinary shopping situation is concerned one cannot seize upon these possible differences and claim that owing to them the situation is one of *choosing*. For all that the ordinary consumer in the ordinary shopping situation can determine for himself in a rough-and-ready way the alternatives up for selection are essentially identical and so his situation vis-à-vis them is one of *picking*. The fact that a thorough laboratory examination of the cans and their contents may provide some bits of information that could help differentiate between the cans is of no consequence here. For one thing, the cost of obtaining this additional information far exceeds the marginal utility the ordinary shopper stands to gain from it: after all, how much are you willing to invest in order to find out which of the many soup cans you face is *really* "the best"? Besides, sending the cans off for this examination presumably requires the prior purchase of all of them from the shop, thus frustrating your initial aim of buying just one; and if you mark for examination not all but only some of them, this already involves picking anyway.

There is a further point, though, that is made in the Montaigne and Leibniz passages quoted above and that merits consideration here. It is neatly compressed in Leibniz's concept of the *petites perceptions* and its gist is that once it is conceded that the alternatives up for selection are not absolutely identical and that it is likely that there are some discoverable differences among them, it must thereby be con-

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9 This applies to the ordinary consumer in the ordinary shopping situation. Matters are different, of course, when we consider a survey conducted by a consumers protection organization. Here the possible differences among the ostensibly identical cans are of significance and may well be worth exposing. Note that a possible conclusion of such a survey is that the cans of firm A are of a more uniform quantity and quality than are the cans of firm B, and thus constitute a more genuine picking situation for the consumers.

ceded as well that the situation is one of choosing, not picking: it is, on this view, these subliminal differences which, "though imperceptible and not to bee distinguished," determine one's choice. All that we shall say at present in order to dispose of this argument is that, whether or not these (potential) subliminal differences are indeed capable of "tempting" and "drawing" you toward just one of the alternatives before you, they cannot be your reasons for selecting that particular alternative. As far as your perception of the situation is concerned, you are facing essentially identical alternatives. And to the extent that you are also aware that there may be some minuscule differences among them you at the same time surely realize that access to this potentially differentiating information is either not worth your while or else peculiarly defeating of your aim. And so, for all that you know and care, you are in a picking situation. (We shall have an occasion later to revert to the issue of reasons for choosing vs. causes that might determine picking.)

Generalizing somewhat, we contend that in this era of mass production and automatized assembly lines there is an abundance of essentially identical products and consumer goods that repeatedly place every one of us in picking situations. We may choose the type but we often can do no better than pick the token, whether it be a toothpaste tube or a copy of a book, a king-size bed or a motorcar. It may not be all that surprising, we feel, that thinkers of past ages did not grapple with the notion of selection situations with strictly symmetrical preferences: given that the inventory of items available for their consideration consisted basically of products of nature on the one hand and of handmade artifacts on the other, it is quite understandable that the notion of essentially identical picking items would seem to them merely hypothetical, if not altogether untenable.

Let us agree to refer to the picking situations of the Campbell-soup-cans variety discussed so far, those that involve essentially identical alternatives, as picking situations proper. We
want now to mention a different type of picking situation. As illustrations of it, consider the following cases. (a) You are to draw a card from a well shuffled deck of cards; if the color is right (or the number, or the suit), you win. (b) Two identical boxes are placed before you: one of them contains $1000, the other is empty. You do not know which is the prize box, and you are allowed to select just one. (c) F. R. Stockton's story, "The Lady, or the Tiger?"\(^{11}\) tells of a ruler whose method of administering justice was to throw the accused into an arena with two identical doors at the back. Behind one there was a fierce and hungry tiger; behind the other, a young and handsome lady. The fate of the accused—and it goes without saying that the question of his guilt or innocence as well—was to be settled by his opening one of the doors, not knowing which was which.

What these cases have in common is obvious. Each of them involves a selection situation in which the selecting agent has a clear preference for one outcome (or perhaps one type of outcome) over the other(s). Due to the structure, or design, of the situation, however, the information as to which of the alternatives up for selection will yield the preferred outcome is inaccessible to him. In other words, even though the selection alternatives here are not identical, it is inherent to cases of this sort that they are presented to the agent in an identical guise so that he is unable to determine the identity of the preferred one. Thus (reverting to example (b)) the agent clearly prefers—and hence would want to choose—the prize box, but in the circumstances he can do no better than pick one or the other. Or again, he may have very good reasons for preferring the prize box over the empty one, but he has no reason for preferring box A over box B. Furthermore, given that he has as a matter of fact selected box A, the appropriate description would not be "He chose the empty box A"; rather, it would be "He picked box A which turned out to have been the empty

\(^{11}\) Frank R. Stockton, The Lady, or the Tiger? and Other Stories (New York: Scribner's, 1884).
one.” These situations, in distinction from the picking situations proper presented earlier, will constitute what may be labeled picking situations by default.\textsuperscript{12}

Having thus made out the case that there are selection situations that deserve to be classified as picking situations, we shall now proceed to ask: How is picking possible?

\textit{How is Picking Possible?}

We are all familiar with the standard story about choice: Given your beliefs and utilities, whenever in a selection situation choose so as to maximize (expected) utility. But how are we to act in a picking situation proper, in face of essentially identical alternatives? Need we pick? Can we? That is, is picking conceptually absurd?

A survey of the traditional discussions of the problem of choice without preference reveals, as we saw earlier, that some deny the very existence of such situations. Among those who acknowledge that picking situations may exist, or who are anyway willing to entertain the notion of a picking situation as at least a hypothetical one, some tenaciously maintain that such situations are bound to end up in an impasse, that picking is impossible.\textsuperscript{13} There is little doubt that these writers are

\textsuperscript{12} We may perhaps describe the situation as one in which we pick to believe. But it is not clear what is gained thereby, and the issues involved in this suggestion are too complex to be dealt with here. Notice, as a sample, that writers often give the impression that (a) we are free to believe, but at the same time (b) we ought to choose (pick?) to believe in a reasonable way. And, furthermore, when we are confronted with two equally well-confirmed scientific theories, then (c) we are to choose (pick?) to believe the simplest.

\textsuperscript{13} In addition to the passages quoted in n. 3, we ought perhaps to refer the reader to the passage in Aristotle where the earliest mention (though not a discussion) of the problem in hand is to be found and to which all later writers on the subject revert: “If . . . the place where the earth rests is not its natural place, but the cause of its remaining there is the constraint of its ‘indifference’ (on the analogy of . . . the man who is violently but equally hungry and thirsty, and stands at an equal distance from food and drink, and who therefore must remain where he is), then . . .” (Aristotle, \textit{De Caeło} 2. 13. 295b24 [translated by W. K. C. Guthrie]; see also Plato, \textit{Phaedo} 108e–109a).
in the grip of a mechanistic picture. Just as a physical object, suspended between identical forces, remains in equilibrium, or again just as a piece of metal, interposed between two identical and equidistant magnets, is at rest, so also a man who is equally drawn by the various alternatives he faces will, on this view, be destined to inaction.\footnote{See Pierre Bayle, \textit{Dictionnaire}, art. "Buridan." In his "Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man," Thomas Reid has a section called "Of Analogy" where he strongly attacks the tendency to carelessly and uncritically use (or abuse) the mind-body analogy that is so often suggested by common, though misleading, modes of expression in our language. As a paradigmatic example of how misleading this analogy can get, he takes the favorite parallel drawn between the act of deliberation on the one hand and the physical act of scales-weighing on the other. The passage merits quotation in full: "When a man is urged by contrary motives—those on one hand inciting him to do some action, those on the other to forbear it—he deliberates about it, and at last resolves to do it, or not to do it. The contrary motives are here compared to the weights in the opposite scales of a balance; and there is not, perhaps, any instance that can be named of a more striking analogy between body and mind. Hence the phrases of weighing motives, of deliberating upon actions.

"From this analogy, some philosophers draw very important conclusions. They say, that, as the balance cannot incline to one side more than the other when the opposite weights are equal, so a man cannot possibly determine himself if the motives on both hands are equal. . . . And on this foundation some of the Schoolmen maintained that, if a hungry ass were placed between two bundles of hay equally inviting, the beast must stand still and starve to death, being unable to turn to either, because there are equal motives to both. This is an instance of that analogical reasoning which I conceive ought never to be trusted; for the analogy between a balance and a man deliberating, though one of the strongest that can be found between matter and mind, is too weak to support any argument. A piece of dead inactive matter, and an active intelligent being, are things very unlike; and, because the one would remain at rest in a certain case, it does not follow that the other would be inactive in a case somewhat similar. . . .

"The conclusion I would draw from all that has been said on analogy, is, that, in our inquiries concerning the mind and its operations, we ought never to trust to reasoning drawn from some supposed similitude of body to mind: and that we ought to be very much upon our guard that we be not imposed upon by those analogical terms and phrases, by which the operations of the mind are expressed in all languages" (Reid, \textit{Works}, pp. 237–238).} And in response to the opponents of this position, who reasonably point out that nobody who is placed in the Ultimate Picking Situation will be ass enough to die for want of food and that in general people eventually settle for one or another of the alternatives, the categorical rejoinder to them is that to the extent that selection \textit{has} been effected this in itself is a proof that the situation was
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not truly a picking but rather a choosing one. The upshot of this view, then, is that the act of selection presupposes preference: no selection without gradation.

It is quite possible, it seems to us, that at the root of this no-picking-is-possible position lies a biased and misleading mode of expression. The adherents of this view, as well as others, invariably couch the description of an agent's act of selection of one alternative out of two available ones in the formula: "The agent selected (grabbed, did) A rather than B." Now this "rather than" terminology is construed in such a way that it is taken to entail, or presuppose, the formula: "The agent preferred A to B." And this, in turn, amounts to interpreting the agent's selection of A as his having chosen A.\(^{15}\) In other words, the very description under which the act of selection is taken to fall prejudices the issue in that it seems to analytically yield the fact that the situation was one of choosing to begin with.

As a step toward thwarting this analytical connection we propose to describe an agent's act of selecting alternative A in a picking situation thus: "The agent selected (grabbed, did) A to the exclusion of B." This lingo is intended not to prejudice the issue in that it is supposed to be free of any presupposition, or entailment, of preference: it is simply supposed to amount to saying that the agent picked A where B was an alternative.

A word about formulating all this in terms of reasons for action. In the case of a choosing situation, where the agent selects A rather than B, we are generally held to be licensed to say that the agent (must have) had reasons for selecting A rather than B; and this is further unpacked into saying that the agent's overall reasons—in terms of his beliefs and utilities—for the selection of A outweighed his overall reasons

\(^{15}\) It seems that something like this procedure underlies the behavioral economists' notion of "revealed preference," according to which it is the consumer's act of purchasing a (certain quantity of a) certain commodity, rather than his declarations in response to an interviewer's questionnaire, that reveal his preferences (or his preference ordering over a given range of alternatives). Shouldn't this notion undergo some revision in view of the possibility of picking?
for the selection of B: hence the preference for and choice of A. In the case of a picking situation, on the other hand, where the agent selects A to the exclusion of B, we may still say that the agent (must have) had reasons for selecting A to the exclusion of B. But, far from being further unpacked into saying that the agent’s reasons for A outweighed those he had for B, this formulation is—and is intended to be—compatible with saying that the agent also had reasons for selecting B to the exclusion of A, so that any inference of preference and choice is undercut. Indeed, it is constitutive of picking situations that there will be reasons for the selection of A to the exclusion of B as well as reasons for the selection of B to the exclusion of A, and, furthermore, that these reasons be as good and as weighty.

Note that while in a picking situation proper, where by assumption each of the selection alternatives will satisfy him equally, the agent has no reason to prefer one alternative to the other(s), the other side of the same token is that if he has—somehow—effected a selection in such a situation, he will have no reason to regret it. Also, even though the agent has no outweighing reason for the selection of A, once he has—somehow—effected the selection of A he is nevertheless immune to any charges of having acted unreasonably. While it may not be a law that when we act we do so rationally (i.e., that we select the alternative that maximizes expected utility), it may be a law that when we act we do so reasonably (i.e., that we do not select a dominated alternative). Still this may not be the end of the matter. It may turn out that picking situations are always replaceable by choosing ones, and if so we can perhaps always act rationally.

This suggests that it may be possible for us to extricate ourselves from a picking situation by appropriately replacing it with a nonpicking one. But is it? If it is, will accounts of extrication by replacement avoid all reference to the ability to pick, and hence exempt us from having to remove the difficul-
ties involved in the notion of this ability? And if it is not, how do we extricate ourselves directly?

Extrication from a Picking Situation

A rather natural suggestion as to how to go about picking is to select randomly by casting lots or, more generally, by resorting to the use of a random device. This suggestion amounts in effect to the following declaration: Since in a picking situation I find myself at an impasse, I call upon chance to extricate me by supplying me with an extrinsic sufficient reason for selecting one alternative to the exclusion of all the others. In other words, I delegate the power to effect a selection to chance, so that the mere singling out of one alternative by the random device will play, for me, the role of force majeure.

Let us examine this suggestion. It is quite clear, first, that with regard to trivial picking situations of the Campbell-soup variety, having recourse to a chance device may be just too costly in terms of time, attention, etc. Thus the outlay involved in securing a state of affairs in which each of the alternatives up for selection has equal probability of being singled out by the chance device often already outweighs the marginal utility to be gained from securing such a state of affairs: after all, each alternative, regardless of how it is picked, is by hypothesis supposed to be equally satisfactory. Second, resorting to a random device in itself involves a decision, namely, the decision to resort to chance, and this decision most likely involves the selection of the appropriate device—a selection that may quite plausibly be imagined to be of the picking variety. But the most serious objection to this method is that, far from providing a solution, it merely pushes the problem one step back. For suppose the picking situation comprises just two alternatives, A and B, and suppose that you have decided to toss a coin to settle the matter (and, indeed, that you have
already somehow picked the coin that will be assigned the task. You will now have to match alternative A to heads (or tails) and B to tails (or heads). But this, of course, is inherently a matter of picking—so much so that it may deserve to be regarded as the picking situation *par excellence*. In other words, the very use of a random device is premised on the possibility of picking, that is, on our capacity to extricate ourselves from a picking situation: the matching of each of the alternatives up for selection with some one of the possible outcomes of the device is, inherently, a matter of picking.

Another suggestion that appears to merit consideration is the one espoused by Nicholas Rescher as a solution to the problem of choice without preference. Recognizing that recourse to a physical chance device may often be costly or cumbersome, he recommends the adoption of a random selection *policy*, such as "When confronted with a choice in the face of symmetric knowledge, or preference, always to select the first-mentioned (etc.) alternative." By way of criticizing this idea let us note, first, that talk of a policy implies systematicness and consistency (this is surely implicit in Rescher’s use of "always"). Now while being systematic and consistent may doubtless be of help in extricating oneself from some picking situations one encounters, there is just no justification whatsoever for requiring it. Besides, such a policy needs to be *adopted*, and the adoption of a picking policy is of course itself a matter of picking: why the first-mentioned rather than the penultimate-mentioned alternative? Thus Rescher’s own use of "etc." is question begging. Also, such a policy will in fact have to consist of numerous contingency plans: pick the first mentioned (or whatever) when the alternatives are orally presented to you, the right-most (or whatever) when they are serially ordered in space, the first (or whatever) alphabetically when names are involved and they are scattered or in a circle, the uppermost (or whatever) when there is a heap, and so on

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and so forth—not to mention the necessary higher-level dis-
ambiguating rules for cases where two or more of these con-
tingency plans apply and conflict. When all of this is spelled
out, with all the meta-picking that is involved, there is some
room for doubt as to whether it can seriously be maintained
that this method is practically less cumbersome and theoreti-
cally more satisfying than resorting to the use of an external,
physical, randomizer.

Finally, it is of some interest to note that in recommending
the use of a random selection policy in place of a physical
random device Rescher says that it is indeed possible to use
the human mind so as to arrive at such a policy since “men are
capable of making arbitrary selections, with respect to which
they can be adequately certain in their own mind that the
choice was made haphazardly, and without any ‘reasons’ what-
soever.”\textsuperscript{17} Given such a categorical statement of our capacity to
arbitrarily select a picking policy, one wonders about the point
of the detour: why should it not be possible for us to do
without the mediation of the policy, and simply put this
capacity for making arbitrary selections to use directly in any
picking situations we may face? (Note that it may be mislead-
ing to suggest that when we pick we do so arbitrarily: we have
already said that we may in fact be acting reasonably. As for
the converse: at a race A may bet on x to win because x’s name
is “Jerusalem” and A loves the city. Did A pick, albeit with a
reason, or did he choose, though arbitrarily?)

There are some other prospective means of extrication that
are worth commenting on. \textit{Convenience} may be mentioned only
to be quickly disposed of. If considerations of convenience
happen to converge on one particular alternative in a given
picking situation and single it out as the most conveniently
pickable, then surely the problem of picking is avoided. To
wit: we began with a situation in which we perceived the
alternatives as, say, soup can A vs. soup can B. Between these

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 169.
we were indifferent. We then realize that the situation can be redescribed as follows: can A by selection s₁ vs. can B by selection s₂. Between these alternatives, owing to the consideration of convenience, we realize that we are not indifferent and so we can choose. But of course it may be simpler and better to say that just these considerations will have affected the utilities involved in such a way as to render the most readily accessible alternative preferred to the other(s) to begin with, so that the problem of picking in truth dissolves into one of simple choice. If, however, the picking situation is such that two or more of the alternatives turn out to be equally convenient to pick, then the factor of convenience is a superfluous one and we are back to where we started.

The case of habit is both similar to and different from that of convenience. A habit—like reaching for the left—may on some occasions resolve a picking situation. Where it does not, either because it does not apply to the picking situation in hand (e.g., because it is novel) or because it still squares with the picking of two or more of the alternatives, it is of no consequence. The interesting case is when, due to some habit, a resolution of the picking situation is achieved: some one of the alternatives, that is, is in some sense habitually picked to the exclusion of all the others. Unlike the convenience consideration, the habit cannot be said to have supplied the agent with a reason for his selection (even though there may be reasons for a person to act in accordance with his habits); nor can it be incorporated, therefore, into the agent's utility assessments regarding the available alternatives. At the same time the habit can in a case of this sort be considered to have played a causal role in extricating the agent from the picking situation, and as such it may contribute to an explanation of his picking act.

Having surveyed some of the difficulties encountered by the various solutions—actually proposed or naturally proposable—to the problem of extrication, the problem itself is still with us. For although it may sometimes be possible to
replace a picking situation by a choosing one, there is no reason to believe that it is always possible to do so. So we shall at this point state our basic contention that there is no evidence, either conceptual or empirical, to challenge the thesis that people have the ability to pick. This amounts, on one level, to the conjecture that where a genuine picking situation is involved the sentence “A picked x” and the sentence “A picked y” may each be compatible with any acceptable scientific corpus. And, on another level, it has to do with the observation that picking situations do not, normally, paralyze us, nor do they lead us to an impasse. Also, it would seem that we do not in principle depend for our extrication from these situations on any artificial or extrinsic device, on second-order decisions, or, for that matter, on the operation of the “will” as traditionally envisaged: we simply have the capacity to extricate ourselves directly from such situations; we have the ability to pick. One may indeed go further and say that when we are in a genuine picking situation we are in a sense transformed into a chance device that functions at random and effects arbitrary selections (our misgivings about “arbitrary” notwithstanding; still others can be added about “random”).

To be sure, the assertion that we have the capacity to pick at random need not be taken as a metaphysical one: an epistemic construal would suffice. That is, it does not pertain to the level of determining causes of the act of picking, and it is not in principle incompatible with there being explanations (as well as predictions) of this act from the vantage point of an all-knowing Laplaceean machine. What is being claimed, rather, is

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18 From some of the traditional writings on the problem of choice without preference, one may often get the impression that for these writers a picking situation is one in which, as soon as the agent realizes that his preferences and motives are “ever so evenly balanced” and that a threat of an impasse is lurking, he summons from the arsenal that dependable, powerful, secret weapon, the will, which is held in reserve for just such cases and which enables him to accomplish the feat of “homing in” on some one of the alternatives. But for the will, they suggest, we would be asses.

Let us add that the rejection of this highly unsatisfactory “picking-will” view seems to have been the main motivation for the adoption of what was historically considered its only tenable rival, namely, the mechanistic view mentioned earlier.
that on the level of reasons for action, for all that we know we can, and often do, randomly pick. This is much like saying that while the course of a tossed die may be completely physically determined, for us it nevertheless functions as a chance device due perhaps to irremediable human ignorance of initial conditions.\footnote{Would an omniscient being, however, be capable of extricating himself from a picking situation? If this capacity is attributed to such a being, it would have to be metaphysical and not merely epistemic. But then the traditional arguments based on the principle of sufficient reason would seem not to go through: for one thing, God could in such a case pick a time to create the world. If, on the other hand, this capacity is denied this being, would he be omnipotent?}

Is this the end of the story? In many ways it is only the beginning, even when we consider the simplest picking situations with which we began, namely, the ones in which the alternatives are mere replicas of one another. It seems that even here we can add to the mechanism that may actually be at work. Often enough, or perhaps typically, what occurs in a selection situation you identify as a picking one is that you haphazardly focus your attention on some one of the available alternatives. Once you do that, however, then—by hypothesis—none of the other alternatives attracts you more, and there is no room for qualms or second thoughts. So, given the absence of either detracting or distracting factors, there is nothing to prevent you from going ahead and grabbing (or doing) that focused-on alternative.\footnote{In his comment on Aristotle’s passage quoted earlier (n. 13), Simplicius seems to give vent to this idea of the unproblematic arrest of attention that leads to the resolution of a picking problem: “And if neither this nor that [i.e., neither hunger nor thirst] presses more, he will choose whatever he first happens on, as when two pleasant sights lie equally in our view” (quoted in Rescher, “Choice without Preference,” p. 145, n. 8; emphasis added). See also Reid (Works, p. 609) in the passage immediately preceding the coin-picking example quoted in n. 7: “Cases frequently occur, in which an end that is of some importance, may be answered equally well by any one of several different means. In such cases, a man who intends the end finds not the least difficulty in taking one of these means, though he be firmly persuaded that it has no title to be preferred to any of the others. To say that this is a case that cannot happen, is to contradict the experience of mankind.”}
PICKING AND CHOOSING

Picking or Choosing

When the alternatives up for selection are essentially identical, that is, when they can in some objective sense be classified as “picking items,” they determine what we termed a picking situation proper. One selects, however, on the basis of one’s beliefs and utilities. It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that it may not be necessary that the alternatives be (objectively) essentially identical, nor that the agent believe them to be such, for him to judge these alternatives as being of equal utility to him. Put differently, since choice presupposes preference, and preference relevant differences, and given that the relevance or irrelevance of the differences among alternatives varies with one’s interests, what presents itself as a choosing situation to one person may be conceived of as a picking situation by another. Thus you may pick your tie in the morning while others choose theirs. It seems, then, that relative to your beliefs and utilities perhaps any selection situation that you face may be taken by you as a picking situation.

Often this takes the form of a second-order decision: with regard to any given selection situation you may choose—indeed you are free to choose—to allow it to be a picking situation. Selecting a rain hat in a department store, having been caught in a sudden pour, I may well be aware that there exists an optimal choice of a hat that suits me best. And yet, my overall priority being to get out of there fast—before the train leaves or before my toddler wrecks the place—I may choose to forgo all weighing and balancing and simply pick. Or again, you may know all there is to know about the differences between the two holiday resorts you are considering for your upcoming vacation and, what’s more, these differences may well be relevant to you. And yet, being at a loss

be given in such a way that it is not described as an act. Otherwise it would be a dubious replacement that is submitted rather than a helpful reduction. We feel that such an account can indeed be given, but we have none to offer yet.
as to how to weigh all the different considerations and "calculate," or "see," what it is that you prefer most, you may choose to end the tormenting process by treating the situation as one of picking.\footnote{21}

Let us mention in this connection the story told about S. Y. Agnon, who apparently conceded that he often resorted to tossing a coin in cases of indecision. When asked by his puzzled interviewer how he could account for placing such reliance on chance, his answer is reported to have been that of course he did \textit{not} let chance decide for him. Rather, gauging his reaction to the outcome of the toss, he would ascertain whether he was in fact pleased with or disappointed by it, and would accordingly know where his preferences really lay. This seems to indicate that the (second-order) decision to treat a given selection situation as one of picking could at times be self-correcting in that it may expose the situation as having been one of choosing all along.

Be that as it may, note that the decision to pick rather than choose in a given selection situation is by no means incompatible with the received model of the rational decision maker

\footnote{21} It may well be asked, for the sake of symmetry if nothing else, whether it makes sense to talk not just about \textit{choosing to pick} but also about \textit{picking to choose}. Consider the case depicted in Fig. 1. You may opt for \textit{a}, in which case you get a sure prize, or for \textit{b}, in which case you will have a choice between \textit{c} and \textit{d}. If you are indifferent between \textit{a} and \textit{b}, you may pick one to the exclusion of the other. If you pick \textit{b} to the exclusion of \textit{a}, you may be said to have picked to choose. It may be possible to \textit{pick a choice}. In Fig. 2, both \textit{a} and \textit{b} are supposed to lead to a choosing situation. If you are indifferent between them, you may pick one to the exclusion of the other, in which case you will have picked your choice.

![Fig. 1](image1.png)  

![Fig. 2](image2.png)
who is supposed to be maximizing (expected) utility. Once it is granted that the complete information about the alternatives is not “there,” given free, gratis, and for nothing, but rather has to be obtained at a cost, and once constraints of cost apply to the process of weighing and balancing as well, the appropriate meta-utility considerations may point in favor of picking some one of the alternatives instead of laboring to secure the choice of the “best.”

So let us ask: Is it indeed the case that any selection situation could be taken by some agent as a picking situation? That is, aren’t there actually selection situations that merit to be “objectively” classified as choosing situations proper? And once the question is put this way one may go on to question the departure point of this paper and wonder whether what were introduced as picking situations proper cannot perhaps present themselves—to certain agents and under certain circumstances—as cases of choosing. In addition it is instructive to inquire into the possibility that there may be methods designed to convince, influence, or perhaps manipulate us to exchange our perception of a given selection situation so that we shall come to take it as one of choosing, having previously treated it (or having been inclined to treat it) as a picking situation, or the other way round. We shall take up these questions in turn.

Are There Choosing Situations Proper?

It is in fact quite easy to list examples of selection situations that can hardly be thought of as presenting a picking problem for anyone. Thus one normally chooses rather than picks a spouse, a child’s name, a dwelling house, a piece of jewelry, an employee, etc.: the importance, as well as a certain degree of irreversibility of the selection, and the individuality of the
alternatives seem to suggest that these are as close as one can get to paradigm cases of choosing.

And yet even here it is not impossible or outrageous to imagine that one’s choice is finally narrowed down to just two alternatives such that one is either practically indifferent between them or else downright incapable of weighing the relevant differences between them against each other. When this happens one may at the end resort to, or perhaps be reduced to, picking. Besides, note that whether a given selection situation is perceived by you as a picking or as a choosing situation depends not only on your purposes but also on the description. Thus the rather natural assumption that a book is usually chosen, not picked, presupposes the (standard) aim of reading as well as the description of the situation as that of selecting a book-for-reading. However, given such nonstandard aims as wanting to stop the door from slamming or to kill a mosquito or to look absorbed when someone enters your office door, and given that you have already made the (higher-level) decision that the job is to be assigned to a book, then your selection from the shelf of that particular book rather than—or to the exclusion of—the others may well be a matter of picking. In these cases the selection alternatives fall under such descriptions as “door-stopping books,” “mosquito-killing books,” etc.

Are there, then, no choosing situations proper? Are we to conclude that there is no selection situation such that the alternatives it presents may appropriately be described as relevantly different in some absolute or objective sense?

There is an argument of Goodman’s concerning the aesthetic domain which, at least under one interpretation, amounts to a qualified denial of this conclusion.\(^{22}\) We propose to reconstruct it as follows: Every two paintings differ in some physical aspects. A physical difference between two paintings

is in principle always perceptible ("since a single quantum of light may excite a retinal receptor")\textsuperscript{23}, even if it is not, at any given time, actually perceived. As such, any physical difference between two paintings potentially constitutes an aesthetic difference between them; moreover, "minute perceptual differences can bear enormous weight . . . indeed, the slightest perceptual differences sometimes matter the most aesthetically."\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, when facing two paintings that seem identical to you—in particular, when facing two paintings one of which is an original work of art and the other a perfect forgery of it—the fact that you are unable to see any difference between them does not entitle you to take the situation of selecting one of them (on aesthetic grounds alone, that is) as a picking situation.

Thus reconstructed, Goodman's argument in fact falls short even of claiming that there exists a certain well-delineated class of choosing situations proper. All that it apparently amounts to is that "the fact that we cannot tell our two paintings apart merely by looking at them does not imply that they are aesthetically the same"\textsuperscript{25} and hence does not imply that the selection situation they constitute is a picking one, not even of the "by default" variety.

It is quite doubtful whether this conclusion may be generalized and strengthened so as to yield the claim that the aesthetic domain does not admit of picking situations altogether. And in any case the shift in the discussion to the aesthetic realm should not be welcomed since it means dealing with selection alternatives (i.e., works of art) that may be approached in terms of \textit{absolute values} while our picking/choosing distinction was primarily intended to pertain to the realm of selection alternatives that are in principle always substitutable and to which the consideration of \textit{alternative cost} is inherently applicable.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 107 n.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 108.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 109.
Pickers and Choosers

Given the tentative conclusion that it is by and large the attitude of the agent to the selection situation that determines whether he will pick or choose, is it possible that what we termed picking situations proper will be treated as choosing ones? The answer is yes: children do it all the time. A plate full of "identical" candies presents us, hopeless grown-ups, with a clear case of picking, but for our children it often poses a serious and elaborate problem of choosing. While any piece of candy would be substitutable salva valetudine for our picked one, often none is for their chosen one. Children, we say, see differences where we do not see any, or take trifling differences to be relevant—that is, to be sufficient reasons (usually patently ad hoc) for preference. Indeed we generally regard it as a sign of growing up when a child stops "behaving childishly" and is able to take a picking situation proper as just that (rather than fight with his or her little brother over who gets which).

Being able to take a picking situation proper for what it is is not just an indication of maturity, however, but in a way of sanity, or normalcy, too: neurotics, especially of the obsessive-compulsive type, often find picking situations intolerable. Their personality being characterized, among other things, by “a tendency toward massive attention to unimportant detail,” the process of weighing the available alternatives for preference is for them at times practically interminable, and the (second-order) decision to pick all but impossible.

It is of some interest to note a certain shift that has taken place in the course of the discussion. While at the outset the picking/choosing distinction was relativized to types of selection situations, we have at this point come to relativize it to types of personality. There are, it seems, choosers and there are pickers; people may have a disposition to belong to one camp or to the other. The pedantic, meticulous, self-conscious

26 Encyclopedia Britannica, art. "Neuroses."
PICKING AND CHOOSING

Type will presumably tend to be a chooser—as will the gourmet, the refined, and the person of sophisticated tastes—whereas the indifferent, nonchalant, or carefree one, a picker. It will in general be the person’s beliefs and utilities, however, that will be affected by, and will reflect, these dispositions. And so it still holds good, of course, that given a particular selection situation this person will assess the relevance for himself of the discerned differences among the alternatives on the basis of his overall beliefs and utilities, and will accordingly come to ultimately treat it as a picking or as a choosing situation. As for the proposal of an “objective” classification of selection situations into choosing vs. picking ones, the balance of the foregoing discussion indicates that it would not do. Instead it would be helpful to think of there being core cases of picking situations—those determined by what we termed “picking items” and referred to as picking situations proper—at one pole of some vague range and of some paradigmatic cases of choosing at the other. These clear cases at the two extremes may then help form the basis for standard expectations concerning the behavior patterns of people in certain selection situations, with deviations from these presumptive patterns (i.e., choosing in a clear case of picking or vice versa) calling for an explanation.

The Effect of Additional Information

An agent’s beliefs about the alternatives up for selection, and in particular about the differences among them, play as we know a causal role in determining whether he will ultimately come to treat the selection situation as one of choosing or as one of picking. It follows that additional information about the alternatives may effect a change in his attitude toward the selection situation he faces. This is the light in which we may now view the role of the expert. Consulting an expert, you may find out that the selection of a film for your
camera is not, as you tended to believe, a matter of picking but that there are in fact differences among the various products of different manufacturers, and moreover that these differences are indeed relevant to your photographic needs and wishes. So, enlightened now, you will choose. Thus the expert, who possesses more information and hence is able to “see” more differences, may turn a situation which you took to be one of picking (a television set, a rug, a watermelon, or what have you) into one of informed choosing. But his expertise may work in the opposite direction too. Not only does he see more differences: he may also see through superficial and artificial differences to an underlying sameness. Disconcerted, for example, by the huge variety of cosmetics of conflicting claims on display, you may seek the advice of an expert only to learn that as far as the chemical constitution that actually affects the facial skin is concerned they are all identical. So that, if you are indifferent to such additional aspects of the product as its perfume or package, you might as well pick.

Having said this we may now restate one of the major aims of commercial advertising as that of preventing people from mere haphazard picking. It is designed to influence, or manipulate, the consumer to choose the advertised product rather than pick among the various available alternatives. Given that the competing brands of, say, antacids (or bleachers, or toothpastes, etc.) are essentially identical, or at any rate that they are liable to be taken as such, the advertisement will play up some aspect (either “central” or “marginal,” genuine or contrived) of the product in such a way as to lure the consumer into believing that it is a sufficient reason to prefer the advertised brand over its competitors. Thus commercial advertising is often presented under the guise of an expert’s advice, informing the consumer of relevant differences.

But of course the advertising agencies do not rest content with tampering with our beliefs alone: they assault our utilities as well. That is, the ad often not only points out to us some
differences among various products which we might otherwise have taken to be essentially identical picking-goods, but it also is designed to enlighten us to the fact that these differences indeed make a difference, that we just cannot be indifferent to them, that they are relevant to our own desires.

Note, incidentally, that all of this pertains both to honest advertising, where the advertised product does indeed give you more value for your money (whether because of the cartoons on the package that delight your children or simply because it performs better the job it is supposed to perform) and to deceitful advertising devised to mislead you into false beliefs.

Deeper-Level Picking

Is the notion of picking doomed to remain on the Campbell-soup-cans level? We want, finally, to hint at some other, deeper levels where this notion may belong. Indeed, some philosophical literature may be interpreted as suggesting that at the very deepest level of selection, involving the ultimate and most significant alternatives confronted by man, there can only be picking, there being no possibility of a reasoned choice. Somewhat less loftily put, it might be said that, given our beliefs and utilities, we pick or we choose as the case may be; but as to our utilities or values themselves, to the extent that they can be thought to be selected at all, they can only be picked.27

27 To be sure, this is different from the paradigmatic cases of picking discussed so far in that it is not because of symmetry of preferences that one picks but because of the absence in principle of preferences that one picks. It may in fact never be the case empirically that one is in a completely preferenceless state. It is not implausible to suggest that we are "born into" preferences, or conditioned in various ways to having them. If that is the case, then there is room for talk of a conscious process of evaluating ("from within," so to speak) the preferences one finds oneself equipped with so that one eventually opts either to continue having them and acting on them or else to exchange them for different ones. But this process would seem to involve only acts of choosing, not picking. However, once the context is not the empirical one of actually acquiring our preferences but rather that of justifying them, it would seem that at the deepest level there can only be picking.
The Existentialist notion of the absurd, bound up as it is with the notion of the free moral project that man “launches out of his own nothingness,” is underlain by the fundamental fact that the goal itself and any general moral principles that may have dictated its selection must be thought of as choices that are subject to no causal influences and no rational controls at all. Such choices are, in the last analysis, “unjustifiable,” because the reasoning that is commonly thought of as providing independent guidance for choice is itself an expression of that choice.

But not only are our ultimate moral principles and goals in the last analysis unchoosable. So also, for some, is faith. In his brilliant dialogue “Can Religion be Discussed?” A. N. Prior lets his protagonists discuss two hypotheses for the explanation of religious faith: the hypothesis that it is an illusion (along the lines suggested by Psychoanalyst) and the hypothesis that it is not, that is, “that God is real, and faith is his gift.” Barthian Protestant says of the first that “it is probably just as good as the other—that there is nothing to choose between the two.” He refers to the act of picking between these two options as an act of “jumping” this way or that. Logician does not find “this idea of taking ‘leaps of faith’ when confronted with two standpoints between which there seems to be nothing to choose” at all objectionable, since “we are always doing it, and there is nothing in such ‘leaps of faith’ that contravenes the ‘Laws of Thought’.” (What he does object to, of course, is the idea that these two hypotheses constitute a picking situation: “There is everything to choose between these two hypotheses; for one of them makes sense and the other doesn’t.”) To be sure, for Barthian Protestant (in contrast to Sartre), even


though the "leap" toward faith or away from it is a genuine act of picking in the sense that one can have no reasons to prefer one option to the other, once taken it is an act which does admit of explanation since one jumps, as he puts it, "the way one has to." The leap toward faith is explained by divine intervention; it is "an inward miracle of God's mercy."

And so not only in our most common and trivial experiences as consumers in a plentiful society do we pick, but we may in fact pick—or sometimes we had better pick—in a variety of other selection situations. And it just may be that, whether to our delight or to our dismay, it is picking rather than choosing that underlies the very core of our being what we are.

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