

Making Decisions

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Thursday's conversation considered, among other topics, the concept of free will. Some felt incapacitated by the idea that we might not be in charge of our own destinies. However, we noted that the fixation on free will is a fairly Western phenomenon. Eastern cultures are more likely to ask "Is this choice meaningful? Does it make a difference?" To me, these questions feel more important and leave me feeling more purposeful.

Of course, asking "Is this a meaningful choice?" often brings me to the questions of "What is the most meaningful choice? What makes the most positive difference?"

Should we fly on a plane or take the train when traveling to visit family members grieving a beloved pet? Taking the train would mean spending only a few hours with them, but flying would have a much larger environmental impact. Should we use an entirely economic analysis or go with what feels most loving in the moment?

I am reminded of a book I read called *The Most Good You Can Do* by philosopher Peter Singer, which focuses on "effective altruism." He discusses the benefits of donating to charities vetted by GiveWell and other meta-charities that evaluate the efficacy of charities. Maybe donating \$5 for a mosquito nets to prevent malaria doesn't sound super exciting, but they can save lives for minimal cost.

But should our decisions of whether or not to give or whether or not to pursue a particular dream come down only to what we calculate to be the largest positive impact? Is bigger necessarily better? As someone without a car, I pass by people asking for money on street corners on a regular basis. I can never be sure of what they plan to do with the money but I feel fairly certain it's unlikely to have the same magnitude of measurable impact as donating to GiveWell. But is saving money to only donate to GiveWell the most compassionate thing to do?

I'm reminded of our opening poem, *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost. *The Road Not Taken* was originally written to poke fun at the disproportionate weight we often ascribe to our decisions. The narrator of the poem notes that the paths actually looked pretty similar. In fact, we began to wonder if this whole fixation on having to choose one path or the other is an illusion. Maybe there is no path and the real decision is just deciding to keep going on your journey.

I'm not sure the path analogy is a helpful one. Perhaps, instead of envisioning ourselves moving through forked paths, we could envision ourselves moving through life as slime molds. Slime molds are single celled organisms that spread themselves out as thin as possible to explore the full extend of their environment for food. After awhile, the organism pulls its arms back from those areas devoid of nourishment and stretches in the direction that will feed it. Perhaps we need to try a bunch of different ways of making decisions notice how each feels, and then continue exploring the ones that give us spiritual nourishment.

May we lean into each decision with the knowledge that, no matter where our journey leads us, we are continually learning, that we are free to change our minds and forge a different course, and that all the while, our communities will stand alongside us.