A Good Enough Choice vs The Best Choice –

When to Choose Which

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**We are programmed to choose our best perceived available choice**

When faced with a situation involving choice we appear automatically programmed to take our best option of the choices we see as available to us. This might not be what someone – or everyone - other than us would consider the best available choice. It might not include a best choice that is available to us but that we don’t perceive or believe is available to us. But if , for example, my choosing criteria is only that of having the most money and my choices are to take $1, $10, or $100, I am going to take the $100.

This approach is clearly going to give us the best fit for the choice criteria.

Obviously few choices will ever be so simple. If in the above case my other criteria are to not look greedy and to not be duped by a deal that seems too good to be true, I may choose to take the $10 instead. In experiments where a glass bowl full of $1 bills is set out in a public place with a sign that says “Free money” many people will not take any, and most who do take the money take only some of it and not all of it.

**How does this become more complicated?**

There are many factors that make determining what the best choice is difficult to do. As identified above, we have to perceive that the choices are there. In my class on Downsizing I offer people the choice of taking their unwanted goods and mailing them off to “Relief Agency” in some impoverished city, with no return address on the box. This is a real choice that few people perceive on their own, because it “isn’t how things are [normally] done.” That doesn’t make this option unreal, but it does make it “unthinkable” – unperceivable.

The second factor, also mentioned above, is that even though we may perceive a choice as real, we may not believe it is a choice that we can take. Other people might drop off 40 boxes of books at a Library’s doorstep in the dead of night as a way to find a home – or find someone who can find a home – for the discards from a spate of downsizing, but perhaps you believe that this is something that would be impossible for YOU to do. (I didn’t think I’d do it, but I did exactly that once about 10 years ago .)

We could spend a lot of time discussing these first two factors, but let’s instead concentrate on the next three. These are the factors of time and complexity, and of the inability to accurately predict the future. These three go to the heart of deciding when to make a “good enough” choice rather than trying to make the best choice.

**Time and complexity**

In an ideal world we have all the time and information we need to determine what the best choice is. If you find that ideal world, please email me immediately at [uncommon.alaska@gmail.com](mailto:uncommon.alaska@gmail.com).

The more complex the choice-determining criteria are, the harder it usually is to determine the best choice.

Another key factor in determining the best choice is the number of available choices out there. Initially having more choices allows you to better tailor your response to the choice criteria. At some point, however, the greater number of choices begins to make the process of determining which of the multitude of choices is the single best choice a difficult and onerous task. Given that most human beings have difficulty paying conscious attention to more than 5-7 things at once, any time the number of available choices under immediate consideration exceeds that number there are likely to be difficulties.

We avoid some of these by a kind of grouping called “chunking.” What this means is that we find ways to categorize our choices down into smaller groups. If, for instance, I can use color as a criteria, I can utilize the two categories of red choices and non-red choices to parse my choices down to a smaller number. Continuing this kind of process my hope is to get the final number of choices down to five or less.

This process works well if I am familiar enough with the choice to quickly identify meaningful ways to divide the choices into smaller groups – if I can identify good criteria for prioritizing or eliminating options. If I am unfamiliar with the choices or with making this kind of choice, I may not be able to use this technique effectively or with confidence. The sheer number of choices now becomes confusing and burdensome – how do I possibly determine which single one is the best? The choosing has become inordinately complex.

In such situations, as well as with only moderately complex situations, our non-ideal world may also simply not allow us sufficient time to rationally and methodically work through all the options and choice criteria fully. If that would take a week but I have to decide this today, I clearly have a problem.

Time also becomes a problem when the choices themselves are changing over time. The situation/choice I’m considering and rationally analyzing now may no longer be the same by the time I’m done analyzing it.

**Inability to predict the future**

Often what ultimately determines whether we made the best possible choice is how the choice turns out – what happens after the choice has been made. Perhaps if we had sufficient time and information we could come up with reasonable accurate predictions of the probabilities of a successful outcome for each of our possible choices.

But, unfortunately, that also is something that happens in an ideal world but is extremely rare in the world we live in. We often make choices based on incomplete information and fingers-crossed guesswork as to how things will turn out. If you won’t in these cases know which is the best choice until AFTER you had to make a choice, what do you do with that?

**Good Enough choices**

In the cases just described complexity, time constraints, and/or the inability to predict with certainty the actual outcomes of the possible choices all make seeking out the best choice next to impossible. Let me repeat that: making the best choice in these situations is next to impossible. So trying to do that is no longer a good strategy.

It’s hard to let go of that.

But hanging on to it only leads to frustration, second-guessing, tentative decisions, waffling back and forth, and decision paralysis a—with its subsequent giving up of your ability to influence the choice and instead letting chance and outside forces dictate what happens.

The alternate strategy in these situations is to let go of Single Best Choice and embrace Good Enough Choice instead.

**How does making a good enough choice work?**

Basically a good enough choice strategy recognizes that it is impossible to make any further discriminations between a final set of choices – either because you have run out of time, you don’t have the information you need and can’t get it or can’t get it in time, the situation is fluid and the choices are changing or going away, or you have no way to reliably believe you can accurately predict the probabilities of which choice will give you the outcome you want – or you don’t trust that the apparent probabilities are right.

What you have is a set of good choices but no way to determine which is the best choice.

The good enough strategy asks this question: is this a situation where having a good enough answer is, well, good enough? We know that after we pass the point where we have enough for what we NEED, plus a little more, the correlation between having more (of whatever it is) and satisfaction/happiness breaks down. Having more of whatever it is no longer is pretty certain to make us happier, and in fact could make us LESS happy. More becomes something of a crap shoot.

So the single best choice – the “more” good choice – may not in fact make us any more satisfied than the simply good enough choice. “Settling” for good enough may not in fact be settling at all.

**But wouldn’t this approach act to stop me from ever trying to be better, from ever trying to excel?**

There’s a simple answer to that: yes it would. IF, that is, you use the good enough strategy all the time. It’s no better when used all the time than the single best answer strategy is. We’ve all heard the phrase “good enough for Government work.” That’s the danger of too much reliance on “good enough.” There are situations in which we CAN strive for the single best answer – or if not that, for a better or a very good answer. I believe that in those situations we are best served by doing just that – IF the thing we’re making the choice about is sufficiently important to us (or to the larger community we are connected to) for us to make the effort required to make a better than just good enough choice.

**Confused?**

It would be nice to simply state that one strategy or the other is the BEST one – the single best answer. Many people subscribe to just that, telling you through books and other means that you should always strive to do your best, to find and pursue that single best choice – or telling you that in today’s world of access to enormous amounts of possible choices you should always just go with “good enough” choices, that trying for the best choice will only bring dissatisfaction and pointless extra effort and anxiety.

Knowing when to go with a good enough choice and when to go beyond that isn’t always easy, and it differs depending in each individual and the changing circumstances in each individual’s life. At best we can look to guidelines – heuristics – that tend to work most of the time, but not always. Go for the best answer when you can and when it seems worth it to your personal set of values, goals, and beliefs to do so. When time constraints, complexity, or inability to predict which choice will have the best outcome make finding a best choice really difficult or impossible, accept that the healthiest strategy is that of going with any of the choices that are good enough.

The more you use BOTH strategies, the more skilled you will get at knowing which to use when, and to being able to switch back and forth between them as time works to inevitably make situations change. For the strategy you aren’t as familiar or comfortable using, find ways to practice it to develop your skill – and by practice I mean setting up a safe situation where you can try it out but not be seriously harmed as you make the inevitable errors that come when first learning a new skill, AND then doing some real-world testing to learn what you still need to know or get better at doing. Practice sometimes makes perfect, but pretty much always makes better. Which do you want?

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