How does philosophy play role in decision making?

You’re enjoying a leisurely walk in the woods when you come to a fork in the path. You pause to think about what to do, and you decide to go right. According to some philosophers, if free will was at work at the time, you could have acted differently.

Philosophers tend to be cautious about theoretical matters. Decided to go left is a different mental action from deciding to go right. But we might say that deciding a bit later than you actually did – say, deciding on the right fork after an extra thirty seconds of thought – is another way of acting differently. Other alternatives include deciding to turn back and deciding to sit for a while. The main point, according to the philosophers I have in mind, is that if you freely decided on the right fork, you could have done something else instead at the very time you made that decision.

What does the idea that you could have done something else at the time come to? According to some philosophers, it comes to this: in a hypothetical universe that has exactly the same past as our universe and exactly the same laws of nature, you do something else at this very time. In our universe, you decide on the right fork at noon. And in a possible universe that would have been actual if you had behaved differently at noon – one with the same past as the actual universe right up to noon and the same laws of nature – you do something else at noon. Having a label for this idea will save space: I’ll call it Openness.

Does Openness fit your experience of decision-making, at least in some cases? I predict you’ll say yes. I’m not saying that you experience other possible universes. The question is whether it sometimes seems to you that, when you decide to do something, you could have done something else instead – and not just in the sense that if the past (or the laws of nature) had been different, you would or might have done something else. Your answer, I’m guessing, is yes.

How do your decision making processes work if and when you have Openness? A simple model might help. Here’s one. When you are unsettled about what to do, your beliefs, desires, wishes, hopes, habits, reasoning, and the like all feed into a tiny neural roulette wheel in your head. The wheel has a thousand slots. The slots represent outcomes. For example, two hundred slots may represent your deciding on the left fork at noon while another two hundred represent your deciding on the right fork then. Continuing to think at noon about which fork to take may be represented by five hundred slots. And the remaining hundred may be divided among such things as deciding to turn around, deciding to sit down, and so on. When the wheel is activated, a tiny neural ball drops onto it. The ball bounces along the wheel and eventually lands in a slot. Its landing in a slot represents an outcome – for example, deciding to take the right fork or continuing to think about what to do. Two adjacent slots represent the same outcome only when one outcome is represented by more than five hundred slots. What determines the distribution of slots are the things I mentioned – your beliefs, desires, reasoning, etc.

I’m not claiming that this is the only model of how you work as a decision maker if and when you have Openness. But it is a model, and it may help you think about the nature of Openness. The model suggests that your deciding on the right fork at noon was partly a matter of luck. Until the ball settled into a slot for that decision, there was a chance that it would land in a slot for another outcome.

Openness can be frightening. Imagine a president who believes it would be best not to order a nuclear attack but is considering doing it anyway. He has Openness, the launch button is in front of him, and pressing it is represented by several slots on his wheel. Pressing the button would probably start World War III, as the president knows.

I prefer a less frightening story. Here’s one. Joe is down on his luck. He was expelled from college for cheating a few months ago, and his parents disowned him. He’s been struggling to make ends meet. Joe’s complaints about his condition in a sketchy saloon prompt an acquaintance to offer to sell him a gun. “With this,” the acquaintance says, “you can raise a lot of money in a hurry.” Joe’s wheel starts spinning. He has never committed a violent crime and he has never handled a gun, but he is open to the possibility. He decides to buy the gun. In another possible universe in which everything is the same right up to the moment he makes that decision, he declines the offer.

A couple of days later, Joe’s thoughts turn to the gun. He considers selling it for a small profit. His wheel starts spinning. Joe decides to keep the gun for a while, but he could have decided to sell it. If the ball had landed one slot away, that’s what he would have done.

A week later, Joe is wondering how he will pay his rent. He thinks again about selling the gun. And again the wheel starts spinning. He decides to use the weapon at a small shop on the other side of town. Joe’s plan is to brandish it while loudly demanding money. He’s confident that the cashier will simply comply; he definitely has no intention of firing the gun. Unfortunately, things don’t go according to plan. As Joe is speaking to the cashier in what he hopes is a very threatening voice, he sees the man reach under the counter – perhaps for a weapon. Joe thinks about running away, and his wheel is activated. He decides to fire a warning shot. But he’s nervous and shaky. He accidentally shoots the cashier in the hand. Things could have turned out very differently.

I’ll return to Joe shortly, after a brief note on brain science. Some scientists have reported what they regard as evidence of indeterministic brain processes that influence behaviour. Indeterministic processes, by their nature, leave open more than one outcome. The experiments I have in mind were done with fruit flies, not human beings. But if tiny brains are indeterministic organs, big ones might be too. The tiny neural roulette wheel is a cartoon image of how an indeterministic brain might work in producing decisions. I will not speculate about the low-level mechanics of indeterministic brain processes, but I will mention an alleged possibility. In his book The Mindful Universe, Henry Stapp suggests that there are quantum probability clouds associated with calcium ions moving toward nerve terminals. This low-level openness can underwrite Openness.

Back to Joe. He had a string of bad luck. He made several bad decisions. Joe definitely isn’t a hardened criminal; and he’s far from thoroughly bad. He’s good enough to have decided not to buy the gun, to have decided to sell it without ever using it, and so forth. And, each time, if the ball had landed just a slot away, he would have made a better decision.

Does Joe’s bad luck get him off the hook? Does it mitigate his moral responsibility for his bad decisions? Or what? These questions are difficult. Some reflection on Joe’s internal workings might help.

In the roulette wheel model of Openness, as I mentioned, a person’s beliefs, desires, wishes, hopes, habits, reasoning, and so on all feed into the tiny wheel and determine what its slots represent (including how many slots a possible outcome gets). All these things are influenced by past decisions the person has made and his or her past behaviour. People can and do learn from their mistakes and from their successes; and what they learn has an effect on how the wheel is divided up when it’s time to make a decision. Efforts at self-improvement can also have an effect on this. A person who has been smoke-free for a year is likely to have a very different distribution of outcome slots when he feels tempted to smoke now than he did a year ago. The same is true of a person who has made a lot of progress in overcoming a tendency to procrastinate or overeat.

With this in mind, we might be inclined to see Joe as having significant responsibility for how his wheel is configured when he makes the decisions I described and for the decisions he ends up making. After all, he spent years shaping his wheel. To be sure, whenever there was Openness in his decision making, some luck (or chance) was involved – but “some luck” might not be enough to absolve him of responsibility entirely.

There are people who want to have their cake and eat it too. Some such people may want to have a kind of control over their decisions that includes Openness and leaves nothing to chance. They may believe that only this kind of control – call it Magic – can make it truly up to them what they do. But this kind of control is just as impossible as a delicious cake sitting on my kitchen counter even though I just devoured it. Why? Because indeterministic control in the absence of chance is impossible. If Joe decided with Openness to buy the gun, there was, right up to the moment he made that decision, a chance that he would not make that decision then.

Some believers in Magic may be irresistibly drawn to the conclusion that Joe lacks free will and moral responsibility. But some of us seem to be free to struggle with the question how free will and moral responsibility can coexist with Openness. I struggle with this question in my book Free Will and Luck – even though I’m not convinced that free will requires Openness.

Even if Openness is an illusion, other kinds of luck may seem to threaten free will and moral responsibility. I thought about discussing a second kind of luck here (one associated with determinism), and I decided to settle the question whether I would by tossing a coin. Given the outcome, I’ll stick with Openness.

Many games involve a mixture of luck and skill. In blackjack, players compete only with the dealer, whose every move is dictated by the rules. Unlike the dealer, the players have options: for example, they can hit (request another card), stand (refuse additional cards), double their bets in certain situations, and split pairs (for example, two aces) into two hands. What cards one gets is a matter of luck, and skilled players have memorised and are guided by reliable tables about when they should hit, stand, and so on. Very skilled players keep track of the cards they have seen – they “count cards” – and they adjust their playing strategy accordingly.

Free will may also involve a mixture of luck and skill. According to one way of thinking about free will, just as luck is an essential part of (legal) blackjack, the kind of luck involved in Openness is an essential part of becoming a free agent. But whereas luck is an ineliminable part of legal blackjack, free agents might reasonably seek to eliminate (or at least reduce) luck in an important sphere of life. Blackjack players who want to maximise their chances of winning (legally, of course) should learn how to minimise the potential consequences of bad luck and to maximise the potential consequences of good luck. So they should learn to count cards, memorise a good set of blackjack tables, and play accordingly. What might rational folks do about the luck involved in Openness, given their aspirations? One thing they might do is to try to become so good at resisting temptation that there is no longer a chance that they will decide contrary to what they judge best. If you see no good reason to prefer the left path to the right, and vice versa, a wheel that gives you a fifty percent chance of each decision should be fine with you. But when you know that it would be much better to go left than to go right, a wheel that gives you a chance of deciding to go right is potentially dangerous.

Rational folks also try to learn from their mistakes and successes, and they sometimes embark on projects of self-improvement. Again, in the roulette wheel model of free agency, these efforts shape decision wheels.

In “Gimme Shelter,” Mick Jagger warned that war is just a shot away. In a decision maker with Openness, war might be just a slot away. Fortunately, decision makers who can shape their wheels are not entirely at the mercy of luck. And with luck, free agents may be able to configure their wheels in such a way that they have no chance at all of making very bad decisions.