

# Hard choices

“Many of our most serious conflicts are conflicts within ourselves. Those who suppose their judgements are always consistent are unreflective or dogmatic.”

JOHN RAWLS, *JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS: A RESTATEMENT*

## 1. Introduction

The choices that we make ends up being the life that we live. In the light of this, it will be a source of some relief to hear that, in most situations, we will not face any great difficulty in deciding what we must do. This is because, in most situations, there will be some course of action that will qualify as the best thing to do. So, for example, we will take the train or flight that is the best in terms of minimizing the time and costs of travel. A firm will make use of what it takes to be the best combination of capital and labour in order to produce some basket of goods that the firm thinks will best meet its objective. At a more mundane level, we buy the wine that we take to be the best in terms

of taste and price, and so on. Sometimes, however, there might not be a course of action that qualifies as the best thing to do. Or, at the very least, the best thing to do will not be as obvious or self-evident.

To illustrate, consider the following question: should you decide to become a parent? Now to be sure, some people will answer this in the affirmative, while some others may decide that not having children is the best way to proceed with life. Crucially, for us, it is not hard to imagine that there is some individual for whom this question will be a difficult one to answer; and they find it difficult precisely because, for them, it is unclear what the best

answer to this question would be. Further still, the best thing to do is unclear because the evaluative conflicts that such a person encounters – between the value of professional success and the value of family life, say – may not be fully resolved before the point of decision making comes. Similar examples abound. What career should you pursue? Should you spend your year-end bonus on that fancy watch you’ve been eyeing for more than a year? Or should you donate it to charity? Given the resources at your command, you can only afford to educate one of your two children. Who should you educate?

These choices have been called hard choices, and I am inclined to say – following the Rawlsian epigraph above – that those who do not find hard choices to be a recognizable phenomenon

are either unreflective or dogmatic. Here I wish to say something about why studying this phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines economics and

philosophy, and towards the end, I will briefly note what policy implications a sound analysis of hard choices can have.

## 2. Why studying hard choices needs to be interdisciplinary?

As we have already suggested, in a hard choice there is no answer – or at least no self-evident answer – to the following question: what is the best way to proceed? It is exactly this point that shows us why studying hard choices needs insights from economic theory. To explain, while we can find many examples of hard choices, as scholars we also wish to abstract away from examples so that we can systematize and build a theory of hard choices. Economics is crucial here precisely because the discipline has developed the most sophisticated theories of decision making.<sup>1</sup> This body of work – often clubbed together under the broad umbrella called rational choice theory – helps us build a systematic theory of hard choices because this body of work helps us understand when exactly it is the case that one cannot go for the best. And therefore, when exactly it is the case that an agent is facing a hard choice. Further, rational choice theory can also help us in answering a question that the phenomena of hard choices

raises, and that question is this: what, if anything, should you do when you cannot go for the best? Rational choice theory helps us answer this question because, under its broad umbrella, there are various different proposals that are directed to the issue of how to proceed when we cannot go for the best. Our understanding of these different ways to proceed – these different decision rules, as they are often called – has been expanded greatly by this body of knowledge. However, when we have to evaluate these different decision rules with the aim of investigating whether or not they are defensible is exactly the point at which we need philosophy.

In order to see why, recall that the different decision rules that we can invoke when we cannot go for the best are traditionally used in economic analysis to explain behaviour in different settings. When we make choices, however, we do not only seek an explanation for why we behave as we do. We also wish to justify our

choices.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we wish to defend how we behave when we think we are wrongly criticised, and we apologize when we cannot defend how we behave. Now, this fairly straightforward thought raises, for us, quite an obvious question: can the decision rules that we invoke when we cannot go for the best be justified? Are they defensible as a basis of rational decision making when we encounter a hard choice? Plainly, this is a question in the normative domain, and the normative domain is the domain of philosophy. Which is why studying hard choices needs philosophy.

In my own research I have tried to combine insights from economics and philosophy to present an account of hard choices, and one of my main findings is this. If you cannot go for the best because you cannot compare the alternatives for choice, then there is no defensible decision rule that you can invoke to make a choice.<sup>3</sup> That is, you cannot make a rationally justified choice in

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to this literature, see Gilboa (2010) and for a tour d'horizon of the literature on decision making with multiple attributes, see Keeney, Raiffa, and Meyer (1993).

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to these issues of explanation and justification, see Alvarez (2017).

<sup>3</sup> See van Hees, Jitendranath & Luttens (2021) and Jitendranath (ming).

these situations. This is of course a conceptual insight, and it is often difficult to immediately

see what the policy relevance of any conceptual insight can be. I shall nevertheless conclude by

noting what policy implications this insight can have.

### 3. An implication for policy

Now, if my account of hard choices is correct, then I believe that the conceptual insight we have gained from my analysis help us think about how we might design social institutions where such choices do not confront people, or confront them less often. Let me explain what I mean with a story from philosophy that is due to Martha Nussbaum. This story also has the virtue – not widely shared by the examples philosophers present – of being a real story (rather than an imagined one). Apparently, the philosophy research seminar at Harvard always began at 5 p.m., which also had the unhappy feature of being the time at which child care centres closed.<sup>4</sup> Those who had child care obligations felt like they were facing a hard choice. As Nussbaum makes the point, “Either we would be deserting

our duty to our colleagues or we would be deserting our duty to and love of our young children.” While we are not sure about whether Robert Nozick ever experienced the situation as a hard choice, he nevertheless brought attention to the issue at one such seminar where – mid way through an invited speaker’s presentation – he stood up and said, “I have to go now: I have to pick up my son from hockey practice.” This apparently did change how philosophy seminars at Harvard were arranged going forward such that the conflict many people did encounter – between caring for one’s children and the duty to one’s colleagues – was resolved.

The important point to get across here is this. It may well be the case that many hard choices that individual’s

encounter are a consequence of our social arrangements – making young people decide what careers will be open to them even before they finish high school, for example. If this is correct, we need to do more work to understand where and why individuals systematically report that they cannot do their best because they face incomparable alternatives for choice. This work will have to combine the empirical methods of the economist with the conceptual tools of the philosopher. Crucially, with this knowledge, we can hope to reform our institutional arrangements to ensure that such hard choices do not confront people. Or confront them less often.

<sup>4</sup> This is recounted in Nussbaum (2000).

## References

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