

How We Make Choices:
Imbalance as a Necessary Condition

“Minimal Sufficient Impetus”

Theo Douwes
San Diego Mesa College
April 12th, 2019

In this paper I will discuss what conditions allow a conscious being to make choices, assuming the conscious being has free will over their actions.

Many people believe that having too many choices limits an agent's freedom by incentivizing the agent to consider all rewards and consequences of the many options. I side with this belief: too many options limits us. Because humans believe it is worthwhile to spend time thinking about their options, so they may choose the best possible option. In many cases it is not worthwhile to think about .

So, while I do think being presented with too many options is dangerous I also think being presented with identical options is dangerous.

With too many choices an agent believes it is a worthwhile use of their time to understand what the best option is. The same goes for identical options. An agent believes it is worthwhile to spend time trying to find discrepancies in choices, even if they're identical.

When the choices are identical, and the agent does not know that the choices are identical, an agent attempts to find differences between choices.

The common held belief is that when an agent is unable to come up with any differences (for why one is better than the other) between identical choices the agent will choose at random. I argue against this - saying that if an agent cannot come up with any differences for one choice over another, the agent might not make a decision at all.

The implications of my position are the following:

- 1) An agent has the ability to act mobility in physical space because perceived choices are not (effectively) perfectly equal.
- 2) If you want to make a decision, create an imbalance by creating higher value in one choice over another.

Consider the following thought experiment. The thought experiment assumes we have free will.

You wake up and find yourself in a barren, completely flat desert. No belongings, only clothes. It immediately hits you that you are very thirsty, in fact, so unhydrated that if you are unable to find water you will die. You are an Atheist and you want to keep living. Finding drinking water becomes the utmost priority.

You gather your bearings by making a 360 degree scope of the surrounding area. As far as your eyes can see the sandy terrain is perfectly even, and in the distance there are waterholes in various directions. You look up and notice the sun is hidden, blanketed by a perfectly even layer of clouds. The light that emanates through the clouds is perfectly distributed across the desert.

Reaching a waterhole is critical if you wish to live. Naturally, your mind goes through the process of deciding what waterhole to choose.

“Does one look more promising than the others?”

“No, all waterholes appear to be exactly equal in size.”

“Does one water hole have a easier route?”

“No, the routes look identical: perfectly even sand with no altitude changes.”

“Wind?” “Wow, absolutely none.”

By every measure of what choice might be best, you hold the belief that the choices hold perfectly equal value. The choices are identical. (In this case, whether the choices are actually identical is irrelevant).



Many people upon hearing this thought experiment would think the lone person would just pick one of the five waterholes at random, and move towards it. In such a case, there is a 20% chance of choosing any one of the five waterholes, and a 100% chance that the individual approaches a waterhole. Those that believe in this believe in free will.

In contrast, determinists would believe the choice between waterholes is predetermined. For them, the likelihood of choosing the predetermined waterhole is 100% and choosing any of the others is 0%.

What I would like to propose here is that there is a sixth possibility. The sixth possible outcome is that the individual does not pick any waterholes, and instead does not physically move from their original point. The idea here is that the identity of the choices make it impossible to act a choice out, because there is nothing to instigate choosing one waterhole over another.

The individual is not paralyzed by choice, rather there is not ample impetus to warrant action on behalf of the individual. I concede, not venturing towards any of the waterholes seems awfully irrational, not to mention going against our instinctual mindset to survive - we are predisposed to seek means that would keep us alive.

Before I continue I would like to offer to play devil's advocate. The bizarre hypothetical situation of a wanderer in the desert confronted with identical choices might not only be unrealistic, but utterly impossible. If we discounted all variables that might incline an individual to choose one choice over another (one waterhole over another) we would be describing a world that is perfectly uniform. Such a perfectly uniform world could never host conscious beings or agents who are usually capable of choice.

What makes our world work is an inherent polarity between physical matter; there is an atomic imbalance that gives rise to compounds and life. This unequal spread of physical matter makes it such that everywhere we look, in all directions, there are different possibilities - and choices. Thus, the bizarre hypothetical situation of the wanderer in the desert could not even offer choices. Simply put, the physical construction of the waterhole world does not allow for the imbalance necessary to facilitate the possibility of choices.

So it could be said that the uneven arrangement or imbalance in our physical world gives rise to the possibility of choice.

If such a principle is true, then in the scenario of the five waterholes in which there appears to be choices, the individual could not make a choice, because there would be no imbalance to warrant an action.

Alvin Toffler notes “when confronted with too many choices especially under a time constraint, many people prefer to make no choice at all, even if making a choice would lead to a better outcome.” Likewise, many people when choosing between very similar choices - even identical choices - might make no choice at all.

In both instances, too many choices or too similar choices, a person must have significant enough reason to choose one choice over others. The term “significant enough reason” warrants further analysis. I said earlier that identical choices might not induce ample impetus to warrant an action. Significant enough reason would be the minimally sufficient impetus to warrant an action in favor of a choice.

Generally, there seems to be an inverse relationship between the amount the time it takes to make a choice and the amount of choices available.

A counter-argument might be that higher degrees of differences in choice make it easier and quicker on what choice to choose.

Thus an individual will try to analyze for possible discrepancies between identical options, and end up not choosing any one of those options, even if making a choice would lead to a better outcome.

The reason for this, I believe, is that the mind needs to overcome two conditions before making a decision
1) peace of mind: willing to accept the risk of the unknowable outcomes before going forth with a decision
2) have a significant enough reason to choose one choice over another.

The term “significant enough reason” warrants further analysis. I said earlier that identical choices might not induce ample impetus to warrant an action. Significant enough reason would be the minimally sufficient impetus to warrant action.