

Towards Wise Decision Making 2: Emotions

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In this, the second in their series on decision-making, David Arnaud and Tim LeBon focus on the role of the emotions in making wise decisions.

2) Decision-making and the emotions

Most models of decision-making neglect the role that emotions have to play in wise decision-making. Typical management models include steps like specifying aims, developing alternatives and appraising solutions which make little or no reference to emotions (e.g. Leigh, 1993 and Hammond, 1999). For example, decision-making management consultants Hammond et al., in their recent book *Smart Choices* (1999) helpfully show how to take a couple, choosing where to buy a house, through a careful analysis of facts, values and options. They do indeed offer much sound advice but suggest very little about how to deal with the emotions involved apart from at one point suggesting that if reason and emotion conflict we should wait for the emotions to catch up with reason. This lacuna results, we shall argue, in missing out an area of huge importance in wise decision-making. If one turns to counselling for enlightened decision-making procedures one is equally disappointed. Although counsellors pay considerable attention to the emotions, many do so in a way which presupposes crude philosophical theories about the emotions.¹ Moreover, the counselling literature is surprisingly mute about how to help clients make wise decisions.² It is our belief that it is wrong to see decision-making as a purely rational procedure where no attention should be paid to the emotions. We also believe that counsellors are mistaken in not taking seriously the notion that they should help their clients make wise decisions. It might be thought that we are simply suggesting that management theorists need to take account of emotions and counsellors need to take account of reason. This is not so. We believe that both management theorists and counsellors need to have a better account of the emotions. One aim in this paper is to suggest ways in which management models can be enhanced to incorporate the emotions. Our ultimate purpose is not however to provide a procedure to be used only in management; rather we seek to develop a procedure for *decision counselling*, involving both reason and emotion, which we believe *should* be used in helping clients who have decisions to make about whatever issues they bring to their counselling sessions. In this paper our focus is on the theory and practice of decision counselling in relation to the emotions; in a later paper we will give a more complete account of decision counselling as a whole.³

¹ See for the example the papers by Woolfolk and Robertson in this issue for a critique of some approaches used in counselling and psychotherapy.

² Decision procedures designed for counsellors themselves to use, for example in ethical dilemmas they face, pay equal inattention to emotions (see, for example: Bond, 2000).

³ For example in a future paper we will incorporate insights gained from the first article in this series, on decision analysis (Practical Philosophy 3:1, January 2000).

We proceed in the following way. We begin by looking at traditional management models about decision-making and analyse how these models miss out the role of the emotions by reviewing some philosophical theories about how emotions can be a help or hindrance to wise decision-making. Given this theoretical underpinning about how emotions can help or hinder we then examine what practical steps can be taken to enable someone to produce a wise decision through taking their emotions into due consideration. In this way it is hoped that a more satisfactory decision-making procedure will be arrived at; one which will use make full use of emotional insights, challenge emotional distortions, and be able to recognise the difference.

I) Why emotions should be considered in decision-making procedures

Management⁴ procedures for ideal decision-making usually consist of a series of discrete stages such as the following:⁵

A typical procedure for decision-making in management

Stage 1 Notice that a decision needs to be made.

Stage 2 Understand the situation.

Stage 3 Work out your objectives.

Stage 4 Assess your options.

Stage 5 Carry out the chosen option.

These stages are usually described in purely rational terms. For example, assessing options is described as finding a fit between the available options and one's objectives. We agree with the management theorists that these stages are important in wise decision making. However, as we shall now argue, each stage is full of emotional 'snakes and ladders' which need to be recognised and negotiated if a wise decision is to be implemented. We will do this by drawing attention to relevant philosophical ideas about emotion. Here we are aiming only to show that emotions need to be dealt with in decision-making; in the final section we will attempt to suggest ways in which this can best be achieved.

Stage 1: Noticing that a decision needs to be made

Typically we find that we have a problem to face by listening to our emotions. Particular emotions are likely to play a key role here. Existentialists have pointed out that apparently negative emotions (especially anxiety and guilt) have a positive function in that they not only provide us with *information* of what we value, they also provide *motivation* for us to do something about it. Existential anxiety (*angst*) is the anxiety we face when realising that we are free to choose in a world where there are no certain or God-given rules about *what* to choose. Existential guilt is the backward-looking emotion we feel when realising that our life so far has not lived up to our own standards. Both

⁴ (and self-help - e.g. Hammond et al., 1999).

⁵ This procedure is a composite of a number of management procedures.

emotions should not be treated as pathological disorders to be removed, but rather as a spur to constructive action - in the same way that pain can be seen as spurring us to constructive action regarding the care of our body. To be more specific, in our view, both existential anxiety and guilt are indications that we might benefit from spending some time and effort on decision-making.

While we are grateful for the Existentialists in pointing out the positive role of existential guilt and anxiety it would be wrong to assume that these are the only, or even the most prevalent, emotions keying us into the need to make a decision. Other emotions can also help us notice that a decision needs to be made. Frustration at something not happening, anger at ourselves for putting something off, and the thought of enjoyment of some possible achievement may all suggest that a decision needs to be made.

Here we see emotions helping us as they motivate us to deal with an important issue. Even here though some emotions might be a hindrance. First there might be some emotions motivating us to turn away from making a decision. For instance, we might feel apprehension at the difficulty of the situation we are facing and our own competence to deal with it, fear of offending someone involved in the problem, or even simply be distracted by happiness about some other aspect of our life that is not problematic. Second the emotions motivating us to deal with an issue often have a negative affect (anxiety, guilt, frustration and anger are generally unpleasant to feel) and in order to flee from this negative affect we might be tempted to try and make a decision too impetuously. Third, and this is a theme we will constantly return to, the emotions prompting us to action might be baseless. Emotions often have cognitive content – are, at least partially, judgements. If we are anxious we are anxious about things that might happen to us or others in the future, if we feel guilty we feel guilty about something we have done or have failed to do, and so on. Given this, emotions might be poor judgements; perhaps we feel anxious about something that is unlikely to happen, or guilty over something outside our control. If this is so we are being motivated to make a decision where our immediate understanding of what we are facing is flawed and the emotion baseless.

Stage 2: Understanding the situation

Once our emotions have prompted us to take some initial action then we need to understand our situation more clearly. Whilst it might be thought that this is just a process of perception, information-gathering and analysis, it is here that, following Sartre, we must be wary of emotions miscolouring our view. Sartre described emotions as ‘magical transformations of the world’. Just as the fox in Aesop's tale deemed that the out-of-reach grapes must be sour, so our emotions help us to perceive the world to be more as we would like it, perhaps as a way of boosting our self-esteem.⁶ Imagine that you are in the middle of an argument. You notice that you are becoming angry. According to Sartre, your anger magically transforms the situation from one where the possibility where you or your opponent may be wrong into one in which *they* are in the wrong.

⁶ Robert Solomon holds a neo-Sartrean theory which links emotions specifically with maintaining self-esteem (Solomon, *The Passions*).

Sartre's account of the emotions is perhaps best not swallowed whole - in particular it does not seem to deal very well with positive emotions. Yet what he describes is a recognisable enough phenomenon. Indeed it is often a rich vein for comic writers. It was once said of Basil Fawlty by another character in *Fawlty Towers* that he would provide 'enough material for a whole (psychiatric) conference'. Certainly he would provide sufficient material for a whole paper on the misunderstanding of situations. Hitting a car which will not start with a bush is not only very funny; it is also a way of transforming the situation from one in which he was to blame (for not getting the car serviced) into one where the car was at fault. Such self-deceptive strategies are indeed a hindrance to a realistic understanding of the situation.

Emotions can also help us to gain an accurate understanding of a situation. Jessica Miller, in her paper *'Trust: The Moral Importance of An Emotional Attitude'*, published in this issue, analyses how trusting someone, when the trust is justified, is important for accurately understanding the situation. 'Trust', Miller writes, 'can help us determine when moral judgement is called for by screening out morally insignificant events. For example, if Romano trusts his wife, then neither her late nights at work, nor the occasional caller with the wrong number show up as signs of behaviour that deserve scrutiny. Similarly, if Smith trusts her neighbour, then his inviting her inside his apartment, or forgetting to return her lawnmower do not set off any alarms.' Many other emotions, from love to hate, and from friendship to anger, when appropriately felt, can also help us to accurately understand a situation by focusing us in on relevant aspects.

Stage 3: Working out your objectives

Working out objectives is often described as an analytic process of trying to decide what qualities we would like our solution to have. But this requires us to decide what our values are, what goals really are desirable. The question is - how do we decide what to value? A contemporary American philosopher, Joel Kupperman (Kupperman, 1999), has argued that emotions are very much like a sense which helps us detect value. In particular he thinks that values can be discerned by asking ourselves who or what we admire and despise. We could go further than Kupperman and suggest that other emotions, such as envy and anger, may also indicate what is of value. In his book, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Alain de Botton (de Botton, 2000) describes how Raphael used envy of the great masters to help him become a great artist. Raphael's envy told him two things: first that he valued the works of the great masters, and second that he could become a better painter himself by incorporating their techniques into his own work.

Kupperman and de Botton's suggestions are plausible because of the cognitive content of emotions. Admiring someone involves a judgement that the person we admire has some quality that we would like to emulate, while despising someone suggests the opposite. Envy implies not only the belief that someone possesses something, but also the judgement that what they have is desirable. We are angry when we believe someone has breached a standard that we decide should be maintained. In so far as these emotions involve judgements, Kupperman is correct to argue that noticing emotions can be a royal road to discerning our values.

But whilst emotions might well help us to detect what we value they might also hinder us in making wise decisions. If emotions are partly comprised of judgements and beliefs, they can be baseless as well as well-founded just like other judgements and beliefs. These judgements include ones about *what* we value, and about *why* we value it. Consider the example of someone considering getting married. Suppose, following the advice of the preceding paragraph, they survey their emotions to determine their objectives. They notice some anxiety and interpret this as feeling that marriage threatens their freedom. Should this be taken as an indication that one of their objectives should be freedom? We cannot say this until we have analysed the complex, probably quite largely implicit, cognitive component in this anxiety. In order to assess this emotion we need to do three things. First we need to become clear about what exactly we are anxious about - what freedoms we think might be threatened. Second we need, as we indicated in Stage 3, to judge truly about whether marriage would threaten these freedoms. However even if we perform these tasks we are not yet done as we also need to ask why we value freedom (both positive and negative in Berlin's sense) - what are our reasons for valuing freedom, and can they be justified? Only if all these questions were answered satisfactorily could we say that the emotion of anxiety had in this case been a reliable 'sense' of value. Consequently emotions are best seen as a clue to where value may lie, rather than as a final arbiter of what is really valuable.

Stage 4: Assessing your options

Having decided what matters in the situation, we need to see how these objectives can be implemented. This involves looking for options and assessing these options in terms of your objectives. Again one needs to beware of neo-Sartrean emotional miscolouring. For example, even if quitting my job may (objectively) be a good option, I might not even consider it because last time I quit my job things worked out badly. Put more generally, each option will carry with it an emotional colouring, and we need to be on our guard as to whether this colouring is well-founded.

Stage 5: Carrying out the chosen option

Finally after you have decided on the best option, you must be sure to guard yourself against being prevented from carrying out the option by emotional weakness. Very many Stoic, Christian and rationalist philosophers have argued that the emotions are a grave threat to our rationality. Spinoza, for example, thought that emotions are confused ideas based on false beliefs which lead to irrationality unless we take positive steps to overcome them. 'When a man is prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune' (*Ethics*, p. 187). The emotions, it is suggested, are one, if not the main, culprits leading to *akrasia* or weakness of will, where we end up doing something different from what we consider to be best.

Clearly these analyses capture part of the truth about emotions. You may have decided that you should take the chance and quit your job; yet fear may prevent you from doing so; you may have decided not to eat that cream bun, but be swayed by the vivid prospect of enjoyment. Wise decision-makers will be aware of these hazards, and take effective action to avoid them. This is not the

whole story though: without emotions we would hardly be motivated to do anything at all. The thought of guilt or shame at not carrying out the best solution may be exactly the thing that motivates us to implement it.

Discussion

Taking a step back from the above discussion, we can notice several important features of the emotions. Firstly, and most obviously, they can be both a help and a hindrance to wise decision-making. They can help in making us aware that a decision needs to be made, in providing a clue to our values and objectives, and in motivating us to carry out our decisions. But they can also hinder when they prevent us from starting to deal with a problem, miscolour our interpretation of the situation or our options, and they may stop us doing what we think of as being for the best overall. Emotions can both help and hinder because of a second feature of emotions, namely that they can provide both information and motivation. Emotions such as anxiety, guilt, anger and envy carry information about the situation we face and can motivate us to do something about it - and of course this information can be more or less accurate. Emotions may also motivate us to misinterpret the situation in a self-deceiving way, and to be weak-willed and not carry out the best solution - just as they can help us to perceive the situation accurately and motivate us to carry out the right solution. What is required are appropriate emotions - emotions based on right beliefs, correct judgements, and felt to the right degree. As Aristotle said: 'The mild-mannered man ... is provoked only in that way and at those matters and for that much time as the situation dictates'.

II) Counselling and wise decision-making

Whilst it might be expected that management procedures for decision-making would neglect emotions, it might equally be thought that those used in counselling would avoid this mistake. We might expect to turn to the counselling literature to find ways of harnessing the insights of emotions and avoiding the traps described in section I above. Unfortunately, what we find instead is that the counselling literature is surprisingly mute on the topic of wise decision-making.⁷ For example, the authoritative *Dictionary of Counselling* (Feltham and Dryden, 1993) contains one small entry on decision-making, and this pertains solely to the decision-making of the *counsellor*, not the client. One could well speculate about the reasons for this sorry state. Possibly it is the (dangerous in our view) Rogerian notion that people will decide things wisely for themselves if only the counsellor exhibits the right 'core conditions' of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. Perhaps it is a residue of the Freudian suspicion that engaging in decision-making will inevitably result in rationalisations and providing self-serving reasons. In our view rationalisations are indeed a danger in the decision-making process,

⁷ Two notable exceptions are Egan (1990) and Emmy van Deurzen (van Deurzen, 1999) who in a recent paper also bemoans the current state of counselling in helping clients make wise choices, and advocates a dialectical approach to remedy this.

but are much less likely in a dialogue with a counsellor on guard for them than when making decisions on one's own.

Whatever the reasons for counsellors' relative neglect of decision-making, we regard it as a serious omission. All life is decision-making. Any aspect of living can involve solving problems because humans are goal-seeking creatures. Choosing the goals that you wish to pursue is one set of decisions, and so is working out how to solve problems that are in your way of achieving them. Both require you to make wise decisions. This suggests that counsellors, in their work, are often going to be intimately involved in decision-making problems. Roughly there seem to be three categories. People might come to counsellors with (i) very specific decisions in mind, (ii) more general problems around their relationships or work and (iii) with a general feeling of malaise or unease. Clearly the first kind of cases involve decision-making (we dealt with one such case in the first article in this series where John was trying to decide how to care for his ailing mother). We would argue that the second kind of cases involve decision-making as well because there are likely to be decision-making issues involved around whether to stay in a particular relationship or job, how best to interact with significant others etc. The third kind of cases, those involving a general feeling of malaise or unease, seems most removed from decision-making but even here aspects of decision-making are likely to be crucial if the malaise centres on problems to do with finding a direction in life (what goals should I pursue?) or with frustration and anxiety around failures to achieve goals (how to wisely pursue goals?).

It might be thought that philosophical counsellors are immune from this sort of criticism. Indeed, philosophical counsellors do attempt to help clients with decision-making. Yet the discussion of section I) casts doubt on the notion that the tools of philosophical analysis, conceptual analysis and critical thinking, are sufficient. If they are to help, it is to be in a more complex manner than merely assessing the reasons for and against a decision. We also need to disentangle the judgements and beliefs implicit within emotions, and apply the philosophical tools to *them*. Finally we have to recognise that we might need to turn to some techniques provided by psychologists and counsellors to avoid the more stubborn emotional pitfalls, such as weakness of will. In order to distinguish such an activity from more general philosophical counselling, we propose a new label, *decision counselling*, for counselling which aims primarily at helping people make wise decisions.

III) Decision counselling and the emotions

This is not the place to give a full description of how decision counselling works. What we will attempt instead is a preliminary sketch of how decision counsellors might help the client climb the emotional ladders⁸ whilst avoiding the emotional snakes in their

⁸ We choose the image of snakes and ladders to emphasise the ease with which emotions can lead to our downfall (sliding down snakes is easy) and how difficult it is to use them wisely (climbing ladders requires some effort on our part). For example, feeling frustrated can easily inspire the snakes of escapism, excessive anger or too quick decision-making but the ladder of surmounting what frustrates us is all-together more difficult and effortful process. A full defence of this claim is

decision-making. We will do this with reference to the decision-procedure outlined in section I), this time supplementing it with ideas about how to deal with the emotions.

Stage 1: Noticing that a decision needs to be made

It might be thought that this stage is redundant in decision counselling because the clients have already realised that a decision needs to be made by the time that they have sought decision counselling. However, we include it for two reasons. In the first place although clients may come to deal with one decision (such as whether to get married) this might easily lead to dialogue about a number of linked decisions (such as where to live). Moreover, these considerations will be important for counsellors engaged in more general counselling as cues that decision counselling is necessary.

In section I) we argued that at this stage we need to listen to our emotions. This certainly means becoming aware of our emotions - something traditional counselling is good at. But more importantly it requires not treating emotions as symptoms to be removed but as phenomena whose meaning requires interpretation. For example, if the client says that they feel uneasy that they are not married when all their friends are, one would need to enquire about the meaning of this unease. Was it existential guilt that they were not living up to their own standards of the good life? Or was it an unreflective reaction to 'peer pressure' which would dissipate once they realised that they actually prefer the single life? Although existentialists emphasise guilt and anxiety, our analysis of emotion in section II) suggests that many emotions should be a spur to decision-making, in so far as they involve a disposition to action and a judgement about what is desirable. The fact that these dispositions to action can be unwise and judgements can be misplaced makes the need for the decision-making process, as opposed to merely following the call of emotion, all the more essential.

Stage 2: Understanding the situation

If clients are prone to self-deceiving interpretations of the situation, decision counsellors need to be courageous enough to challenge these interpretations, yet empathic enough to have these challenges received non-defensively. A good way of achieving this is to allow the client to do the questioning themselves. This is made possible by having a checklist of questions to ask about the situation, which the client is invited to respond to. Such questions might well focus first on the client's feelings about the situation, and whether they are appropriate or not. This will require the client to think about the beliefs and judgements implicit in their emotions, and also about whether the strength of the emotion is appropriate. The aim is to replace inappropriate emotions which might miscolour one's interpretation of the situation with appropriate emotions which help one perceive it in a more balanced way. This focusing of emotions should be followed by asking the client to 'be their own sympathetic critic', which will call for pretending they

beyond the scope of this paper and would require a full analysis of a wide range of cases.

are someone sympathetic yet challenging who will try to give them a better understanding of the situation. In the unlikely event that one could have got him into the counselling room, such questions might even have persuaded Basil Fawlty that the car was not really to blame for breaking down!

Stage 3: Working out your objectives

Inspired by Kupperman's idea that emotions can provide a (fallible) sense of value, at this stage decision counsellors use the list of emotions produced in the previous stage to generate 'candidate objectives', i.e. things that might be worth aiming at. Obviously, this will focus only on those emotions agreed to be appropriate at stage 2. Recall the example given earlier about fear of losing freedom when getting married. If it was decided that this fear was appropriate, then a candidate objective would be 'retaining one's freedom'.

Stage 4: Assessing your options

At this stage, one might again ask what emotions are associated with various options, and again work out whether they were appropriate. This would lessen the chances of clients being unwisely aversive or over-attached to a particular option. There remains the problem of coming up with options that the client might not even mention (for example because of vivid memories of past failures). The only effective remedy for this is for the decision counsellor to be an active yet respectful partner in coming up with and synthesising options; they should not be the passive listener of Rogerian counselling.

Stage 5: Carrying out the chosen option

It is at this stage that the decision counsellor faces perhaps their most serious test. It is one thing to come up with a wise decision; quite another for the client to be in a position where they are likely to implement it. Before tackling the difficult subjects of weakness of will and self-control, we should first recall that emotions can also be a positive motivator towards carrying out the right decision. Remember we suggested that fear of shame or guilt might help people carry out what they think is best. This feature can be positively used by decision counsellors by asking clients to describe their decision in positive emotional language. For example they might say that their decision to quit their job is courageous and wise. Such bolstering of the decision is a judicious way of harnessing emotional motivation towards the right end.

But what of the all too familiar situation where we know what we should do but fail to do it? Once again, the client should be asked to list the emotions that the chosen option induces. These again can be assessed for appropriateness. For example, if I decide to get married but remain frightened at the thought of getting married so fail to do so, one can ask whether the beliefs and judgements on which this fear are based are acceptable, and even if they are whether the level of fear is unrealistically high. This may help, but if the client at later sessions reports continuing problems, then at this juncture the decision counsellor may wish to turn to using techniques borrowed from cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). The cognitive therapist goes one stage further, in asking the client to list

the specific 'negative automatic thoughts' associated with negative emotions, looking for cognitive distortions in them, and actually challenging these distortions when they occur. For example, the fear might be associated with the thought 'I'll never be able to go out with my mates again'. This would be challenged by the cognitive therapist as unwarranted 'fortune telling' and 'magnification', and the client would be asked to replace it with a more rational thought such as 'I'll still be able to go out with my mates sometimes, and anyway I probably won't want to go out with them so much'. If philosophical counsellors hesitate at the idea of using ideas from CBT, they should perhaps recall the Stoic roots of CBT, and also explore the literature aimed at making CBT less hedonistic, less dogmatic and more philosophical (see Cohen, 1995).

Conclusion

Life is decision-making. In order to help clients deal well with their problems the philosophical consultant needs to be able to help them to make wise decisions, and in order to do this s/he needs to be aware of the role that both emotions and reason play in coming to a wise decision. We have argued that at each stage of the decision-making process emotions can be a help and hindrance to the wise decision-making. Either way the role of emotions need to be appreciated and dealt with. In this paper we have proposed a new form of philosophically-based counselling, decision counselling, which takes seriously the importance of emotions in decision-making and uses an appreciation of philosophical ideas about emotion to help clients make wiser decisions.⁹

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