

**Making Up
Your Mind**

About

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Your Mind**

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A rational alternative to
spirituality and self-help

Richard van der Linde

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INTRODUCTION

Rational people don't take things for granted. They need evidence before they can accept a claim. Without evidence, they wouldn't even bother explaining why they dismiss the claim. Or, as the late author Christopher Hitchens put it, "what is asserted without evidence, can be dismissed without evidence".

That doesn't mean that you can't be rational and practical at the same time. For example, governments usually don't have a hard time finding rational, professional economists who are willing to forecast the effects of economic-policy options with models that involve all sorts of assumptions. Some even go as far as making policy recommendations.

Like with the digestion of food, dividing a large chunk of information – such as the economy, or perhaps even the universe – into smaller pieces can help with its digestion. Yet, such models are conceptualizations of reality and are also simplifications, as in reality there is no such thing as rounding and there are no actual delineations. In reality, everything affects everything to some degree, either directly or indirectly.

"All models are wrong, but some are useful."

~ George E.P. Box (statistician)

Models of reality are by definition not entirely rational, but they can be useful nonetheless, and they certainly are often correct enough for their purpose. But while practical and useful, the modality of conceptualization could also lead to two kinds of problems, which might even affect how successful you currently are in making decisions and improving the quality of your life.

First, the conclusions from different pieces might not add up. A well-known example of this is the *chasm* in the field of physics: Quantum field theory holds, and theories about gravity hold, but when put together they conflict (this will be covered in one of the topics). The second kind of problem that can occur is that concepts are gradually mistaken for reality – not on purpose, but in the way a chess player forgets that a certain piece shouldn't be moved when the game gradually becomes more complex. This kind of problem arises a lot among model-makers who fall in love with their models and take it to be the best source for policymaking, while their models do not account for the complex (and often irrational) behavior of people or the unpredictability of particles at the quantum level.

The point of stating these problems is not to claim that conceptualizations, models, and analyses should be replaced by some other things. On the contrary, it is merely to remind that although a model provides inputs for decision-making, in most cases it doesn't provide the solution, for the decision has to be made in the more complex real world and not in the simplified representational environment for which the model provides the best choice.

The thinker's blessing and curse

If you're struggling with making decisions, you're certainly not the only one. It's not easy to live rationally, especially since we have to make thousands of decisions a day. Most decisions are small and have low impact, but the more developed your thinking is, the better you are aware of the dependencies and implications of even the smallest decisions. In a way, life is pretty complex, and the complexity can be overwhelming.

Through technological advancements, we have almost all the information in the world at our disposal for making decisions – to the extent that it could even appear as if there's no element of personal choice necessarily involved in decision-making anymore.

Whenever a decision entails making a prediction about something non-mechanical, however, the element of personal choice is unavoidable. Even if we apply a framework, statistics, or a model, trust an expert, or go for the outcome of a coin toss, it's a personal decision to do so.

Even if you decide to calculate everything and select the option with the best statistical odds – for example, regarding what to eat every day – your decisions are still based on a simplified, modeled, conceptual representation of reality.

Should you or shouldn't you invest in Bitcoin? Is it okay to take a trip to a sunny destination in winter if you need it, despite air travel conflicting with your beliefs about climate change? Should you drink milk if one study says it's bad for your health, while another says it's beneficial?

These are just a few examples of questions that are very hard to solve, if not impossible, with just logic. It gets even harder when you have to make bigger life decisions regarding marriage, career, or what social norms and values to live by.

Some of these bigger decisions also have implications for smaller decisions – there’s a hierarchy in your beliefs and principles for decision-making. When you believe in a god of a religion with scriptures, for example, decision-making usually becomes a lot easier, for the scriptures tell you how to live. Similarly, someone can categorically decide to make their life logically consistent with the latest findings in science because of an atheistic or agnostic worldview.

How much information is enough?

It’s nice to have a clear framework for decision-making, but in real life many people seem to struggle with it, particularly with deciding about decision-making. How do you decide where the cutoff point for analysis of information is and what you leave to your intuition? You can always include more information, but is there perhaps a point of diminishing returns – where the price of processing extra information becomes higher than the benefit from including that information in your decision? If there is such a point, you’d have to decide where it lies. But without a scientific rule, how much analysis do you require before you can decide? As you see, this is rather paradoxical and is the kind of problem a mind can get hooked on looping through.

Some people avoid the question and go about living without clarity. That may work very well, but if at some point your decisions no longer lead to a satisfying life and you can’t turn

it around into a satisfying life again, you don't really have a choice. You might look into coaching or therapy, but how do you decide which kind – there are a lot of options. Even for that decision you need to look into your more fundamental beliefs for omissions, blind spots, or perhaps even inconsistencies.¹ Especially among avid thinkers – often having analytical professions – life can become quite dissatisfying as a result of overthinking and indecisiveness. One solution would be to follow the self-development motto of *just follow your feeling*, but that usually doesn't work for people with a propensity to live rationally.

Taking logical reasoning to its extreme end

A few years ago, I noticed I had run into this kind of a thought loop. I simply wanted to improve my life's quality through making better decisions, but it had actually come to suffer from all this thinking. Yet, it didn't make sense to just quit thinking about decisions, as the (spiritual) people I knew who used this principle didn't exactly seem happier than others – if anything, they seemed less happy.

What I wanted was a clear principle. I sank my teeth in the topic of “making satisfying decisions”, and for a long time, I didn't really get anywhere. For months, I was frantically researching, like I had been doing quite successfully before with topics related to economics and business. This time, I was balancing myself on the razor's edge between science and spirituality, looking into what leads to a satisfying life and, particularly, by what principle to make decisions.

After a while, I noticed that one of the problems with resorting to science for these queries is that there's no definitive answer

to big questions such as the nature of consciousness or the purpose of life. Answers to such fundamental questions would make it a lot easier to hypothesize the mechanisms through which satisfaction would come about and turn it into a formula for living well.

There are many scientific findings on how to live a satisfying life based on observable patterns, and one might just choose among these. But mind you, these findings only apply to the exact circumstances they were found in and might also have side-effects outside of the scope of the conducted studies.

When experimenting with this approach, which basically comes down to targeting your hormone levels by optimizing the levels of physical, social and mental engagement in your life, I felt like committing to an endlessly long to-do list. The indirect effect of the approach was stress from not being able to go to a yoga class or from having to eat unhealthy. In short, it didn't feel like I found the definitive answer yet.

Interestingly, another option had emerged frequently during my research. It was an idea I was not quite familiar with, but in retrospect had turned up in about one in every three books I had read. These books seemed to provide a very clear scope for both logic and intuition for the purpose of making satisfying decisions. The only problem was that I couldn't really wrap my head around what these books were exactly proposing. There was something counterintuitive about them, while – at the same time – they were intuitively appealing.

What these books all pointed at could be summarized as: “Analysis is only useful to process conceptual information,

but decisions have to be made from a non-conceptual point of view for them to be satisfactory over time”.

What this view implies for decision-making is that the more conceptual information one processes, the more challenging one would find it to shift to this non-conceptual point of view; thus, as a general principle, one should refrain from including more information for a decision if doing so impedes the ability to shift to the other modality.

The non-conceptual point of view

But what is this modality of non-conceptual thinking? It would be a bit presumptuous to think that I can explain this right away, while it took me a few dozen books before I got some grasp on the subject. Yet, it is exactly what I’m going to try now. I’ll start with an example of non-conceptual thinking and subsequently use that to explain the non-conceptual point of view.

When we are so deeply engaged in dancing that we don’t really choose our movements, they just seem to happen. This is often referred to as *flow* or *intuitive movement*. In that state of mind you don’t suddenly bump into other people. If anything, you become more sensitive to their movements as well. You still process the information of your senses, but in a more subtle way than analyzing concepts and objects would be (it’s not hard to recognize on a dancefloor who’s in a flow and who’s making conscious decisions about movements). There is thinking going on, but not in the normal conscious way. Although a bit of a *contradictio in terminis*, you could say there is *non-conceptual thinking* going on.