

Gambling with Philosophy

Where Chance Meets Decision Making

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Preface

Gambling with Philosophy explores how chance is intimately involved in every part of our lives. It does this by developing a story where a decision to pursue a career in philosophy, and an interest in gambling, both come about through chance occurrences. The emphasis on chance as a natural random part of the world is contrasted with the common reference to “luck” as a metaphysical force that for some unknown mystical reason rewards the “lucky” few and hurts the “unlucky” majority of humans.

The relationship between chance and gambling is explored through a series of conversations between two people who meet on a train. They discuss the uncertainties inherent in sports betting, horse racing, and casino games. But the conversations also reveal the uncertainties—and gambles—inherent in all of life’s decisions. The reasons for the main character’s decisions involve the entanglement of early life experiences, education, and gambling.

The story proceeds through a series of conversations in which the characters discuss the works of real philosophers, scientists, and novelists. The discussions also include references to movies, music, and books that are also real; nevertheless, the quotes and references are used as part of a fictional dialogue in a fictional setting. For readers who might

be interested, the sources of the quotes and references and where they can be found in the real world are noted at the back of the book.

The conversations illustrate how games of chance, cognitive biases, decision making, and the chance occurrences that occur throughout our lives present us with “gambles” involving uncertainties, the outcomes of which determine the course of our lives.

Chapter 1

TELLS

Excuse me, do you know if the train will be making a stop anytime soon?

As a matter of fact, the conductor is just getting ready to make a stop announcement.

“May I have your attention, please. We will arrive in Somerset station shortly. We will arrive in Somerset station—shortly.”

You were right about the announcement. I imagine you must have travelled on this train before, so you know the stops.

I have travelled this route a few times, but that is not how I knew a stop was coming up.

Since there are many stops along the way, you guessed that one was due.

No, that is not how I knew. I have been observing the conductor for a while. Just before we reached each stop he raised his cap with his left hand and combed

his hair using the fingers of his right hand; then he took a deep breath, exhaled, slowly lifted himself up and walked to the microphone.

So you saw a pattern in his behavior.

Everyone forms patterns of behavior, especially when we perform repetitive tasks.

Don't they have a name?

You mean the patterns?

Yes.

I am sure that psychologists have a name for it, but the term I learned is “tell.”

Isn't that the word that gamblers use? I think I remember hearing it when I watched a few poker tournaments on television.

Yes, it is a term used by poker players when they refer to facial expressions, movements, or speech patterns that telegraph what kind of hand a person has. For instance, in the movie *Rounders*, the main character, played by Matt Damon, suddenly realizes that his opponent's tell involves how he handles an Oreo cookie. Most tells are more subtle than the one depicted in that movie, so it takes a lot of exposure with a particular player to pick up on them. The best players train themselves to try to be tell-free.

Is that possible?

It is probably not possible to eliminate all tells, but most poker pros work closely with observers who study every move, so they are in position to notice anything that might be a tell. If you watch some of the poker shows you can see how each player tries to suppress his or her tells. For example, some players try to regulate their breathing and blinking. Some train themselves to count to a certain number, say ten, before each move they make no matter what the situation, such as before a bet, a call, a raise, or a fold. A quite common strategy after making a bet is to simply stare at the chips or at the middle of the table and not make eye contact with opponents. And many players now wear dark glasses, so their eyes are not visible.

Ah, the windows of the soul.

For poker pros, the eyes are the window to your hand, the poker hand you are betting. There has been a lot written about the eyes and how they relate to whether a player is bluffing or has a strong hand. Professional poker players read all the books, so this helps explain the wide-spread use of dark glasses. Some players have even resorted to wearing hoodies which they place over their head and close tightly so their opponent cannot see their face at all. But some still abide by the old school method of simply learning to have a good poker face.

So the best poker players don't have any tells?

I believe that everyone has tells, but the best players make them hard to discover. Nevertheless, information about players is available all the time they are sitting at a table, whether they are actively engaged in a hand or not. I think that if we could capture every body movement, facial expression, and speech pattern of a player over the course of hundreds of hours of playing time, and if that information could be transferred to a computer that had the right software to analyze the movements, the bets, and the outcomes of the hands, then the computer probably could find a tell in any player.

So anyone with access to that knowledge would always win.

It is not that simple. Remember that the best players train themselves to avoid having tells. Given this, any remaining subtle tells uncovered by the computer might be of minimal importance in an actual game. It might give you a slight edge, but it might not occur often enough, or in the right circumstances to guarantee that you will win. And of course, armed with your knowledge, you too would most likely develop tells that a pro is likely to recognize. So even though you might infer with a high probability that your opponent is bluffing, your opponent might just

as easily have access to your tells that might expose the trap you are setting.

It sounds like you studied this a lot.

Not as a scientist would. My experience is limited to a few circumstances early in my life.

Can you reveal any of it?

Oh sure, it is nothing that others do not already know, so I am not letting you in on any trade secrets. But it did provide me the opportunity and the financial backing to pursue what turned out to be my career—although I use that term loosely.

And what was that career, if I'm not being too presumptuous?

Not at all. I was a philosophy instructor.

Where did you teach?

Many places. I like to travel.

Did you have a position at a university that allowed you to travel but still come back to your school? What is that called—tenure?

Yes, “tenure” is the correct term.

And I believe that tenure requires you to publish or perish, is that right?

Not always. If you wish to have a permanent position, then many schools require you to pass through the tenure procedure. There are several requirements, one of which is publishing a certain number of articles in peer-reviewed journals, depending on the discipline. But many four-year colleges and community colleges do not require publications for advancement to tenure; those schools emphasize teaching. I was able to avoid the publish or perish requirement partly because I am restless and enjoy moving around.

Oh, we seem to have veered off track.

Is that a train joke?

No, no, I'm sorry, I didn't intend it to be funny.

No need to apologize. I thought it was a nice touch.

I meant that we got away from the point where you were going to explain to me how you got interested in tells and some of the experiences you had early in your life.

The first experience that I can connect to a payoff happened quite unexpectedly. I was with several of my friends in a bar where we were watching the local

National Football League team play one of its rivals. I was not a big fan of watching sports; I preferred to play. Anyway, at some point in the game I thought I noticed something odd. At first I thought that I was mistaken, but the more I watched I realized that I discovered a tell in the local team's quarterback. Of course, I did not call it a "tell" back then since I was not yet familiar with the term. It was amazingly simple. I saw two things. First, when the quarterback was under center waiting for the snap, and his feet were lined up directly across from each other, then it was a run play. But when he placed his right foot ever so slightly behind his left foot, then it was a pass play. I am sure that I had watched that quarterback play before, but before that night I never noticed his tell. After I watched him a few more times and when I knew I was right, I started making small bets with my friends about what the next play would be when we had the ball. I said that right before the snap I would predict whether it would be a run or pass. I won the bets, but I was not interested in trying to take money from my friends. It was just fun being able to see something that they could not see. We soon stopped betting after it became apparent that I was always right, but they still wanted me to make the predictions.

*Did you reveal your secret to your friends?
And did you use your knowledge to make
bets with other people in other games?*

No, I decided to keep it to myself, and I never used it after that to make bets. But after the game, I was approached by a man who said he was a scout for the local Major League Baseball team. He had been watching our group and noticed that my predictions were always correct, so he asked if I was just lucky. I said that I had noticed something in the quarterback that tipped me off to what play was coming up. He remarked that this could be important, and asked if I would be interested in talking to someone in the football team's organization. He said that if I were on to something, then maybe other teams had picked up on this and were using the knowledge on defense against the local team. He said that it could be quite beneficial to me. If I were interested, then he would take me to see one of the coaches. I had nothing to lose, so I gave him my phone number.

What kind of work were you doing at the time?

I was working full-time at the U.S. Post Office while I was also attending a university full-time.

How did you manage that?

By doing both badly.

No, seriously.

I am serious. I really could not successfully handle full-time undergraduate studies during the day, and a

full-time job at night. But I needed the money, and although I was not doing well in school, I was attracted to what was happening there. I thought everyone was intelligent, and I was fascinated by the discussions that went on in classrooms, although I did not follow much. It was like watching professional athletes perform, but with words and ideas. I had only experienced that thrill once in high school when my geometry teacher tried teaching us about truth tables, a part of logic. He took some sentences and explained how they could be mapped onto a table that listed all the true and false possibilities, and how certain combinations determined when those sentences were true and when they were false. It seemed so precise, simple, and clear. I did not know where it led or what it had to do with my everyday life, but it struck me as important in some way I could not articulate. It was my first real personal experience with high-level abstract thinking.

Much later, I came across Helen Keller's account of when she learned about words. An illness at a young age left her unable to see or hear, so she grew up without learning any language. But her teacher, Anne Sullivan, worked tirelessly trying to get Helen to connect the patterns of sign language movements that Anne pressed into Helen's palms. One day, Helen made a startling connection: "I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed

to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free!" Helen was instantly transported into the world of ideas.

I can't imagine what her transition must have felt like. Most of us can't remember learning language because it usually happens naturally and so slowly that we never realize that we are being introduced to the world of ideas.

Yes, and we usually cannot remember when we were confronted with abstractions which we come to accept. For instance, we start out thinking the world is flat, and then one day we are shown the Earth as a sphere. This must strike every child as an absurdity because it means that unless we are on top of the sphere we will fall off, the same way that anything that we place on a ball or a balloon would fall off. Our teachers realize this, so they then tell us that we are stuck to the Earth by a thing called "gravity," which, when I was in school, was shown as a large magnet inside Earth. The teachers must have assumed that every child would slap themselves in the forehead and say, "Of course, how could I be so stupid—gravity!" And as if that was not enough, we were also told that the Earth is spinning on its axis at around 1000 miles an hour, and the Earth is revolving around the Sun at about 60,000 miles an hour.

And yet somehow we come to accept it.

Everyone except the Flat-Earthers, a strange society of non-believers; they publish their own monthly magazine. Of course, there are many such leaps into abstraction that we go through without being conscious of when we finally accept them. For instance, why is the game of peek-a-boo so much fun for young children? You hide behind something and then jump out and the child is ecstatic. The giggling and sheer joy continues for as many times as you feel inclined to play the game. It provides an inexhaustible supply of fun, at least for the kid.

Yes, I often wondered why it seemed like so much fun. You would think the child would get bored with the game.

Most likely it is because they have not yet reached the stage of awareness about the persistence of objects.

What do you mean?

As an adult, you take it for granted that when an object goes behind something, the object still exists, even though you can no longer see it. Up until a certain age, children do not know this. That is why a young child cries when a parent leaves the house, because to the child the parent no longer exists, and the child does not know how to get the parent back.

Once the child transitions into the intellectual stage of “object permanence” the trauma begins to fade.

That makes sense.

And of course the child has no conscious awareness of this occurring, just like we do not recall when we fully accepted that we in fact live on a sphere and are currently spinning at 1000 miles an hour. Similarly, children eventually pass into the stage called “conservation.” Before they reach that stage, they fail to understand that, for example, an amount of water stays the same no matter the shape of the container. There is a simple experiment anyone can do. Take a tall narrow glass, show it to a young child, and fill it to the top with water. Then show the child a long shallow pan. Have the child pour the water from the glass into the pan, and then fill the glass once again. Now ask the child if the pan or the glass contains more water. Until a child reaches the conservation stage, she will invariably say that the glass contains more water than the pan, even though she just poured the same full glass of water into the pan. And when the child eventually reaches the conservation stage, where she knows that both amounts of water are the same, she cannot recall ever having not known that fact.

I quickly recognized that people at the university were seeing and understanding the world radically different from me. They seemed to be in tune with abstractions and ideas that were many intellectual

stages removed from where I was. And I longed to get to where they were.

And do you still feel that way?

Oh, yes. For example, I see the leading people in quantum physics, string theory, and black holes as people who passed into a stage of understanding that I will never attain. And there are entire fields of mathematics that are beyond my capacity to grasp. But unlike the child's passing naturally into the conservation stage, most highly abstract fields such as physics and mathematics are not stages that most of us can easily grow into. They might require a certain set of innate skills that not everyone has, but of course, this is pure speculation on my part.

If you don't mind my asking, how did you do in high school?

I did well, but simply because my school neither required nor expected much of us.

What do you mean?

Several years before I attended high school, the city school district had lots of discipline problems in the ten public high schools, so they devised a plan to consolidate the problem. My high school, which was centrally located, became known as "the dumping ground" for every problem student throughout the city. Those students would have to go to my high

school until they were old enough to legally drop out. This resulted in my school slowly lowering the academic standards needed to graduate. Teachers were told to pass as many students as possible and not hold them back. This led to my school perennially being on the bottom of all city public high schools in academic performance.

Of course, when I arrived in ninth grade I had no way to judge the academic level of the school; I had nothing to compare it with. We rarely had homework, and we never finished a textbook for the entire school year. I did not mind. I liked that I did not have to spend time on homework or studying for tests because the tests were incredibly easy. I spent all my time after school playing sports with my neighborhood friends who also went to the same school.

When you became a senior did you plan to go to college?

No, I did not. I expected to follow my dad and work in a steel mill because the steel industry offered the best opportunity for work. Everyone I knew had at least one relative who worked at a steel mill. The network of different mills spanned twenty miles in any direction from where I grew up. You either worked for a steel mill, entered the military, worked at the Post Office, became a bartender, or hung out on street corners.

How did you manage to go to a university?

Mere chance. During my senior year we were told to fill out an application for a local university that had recently gone from being a private school to becoming a branch of the state's higher education system. This meant that the state would subsidize the cost of tuition, making it affordable to most students. As part of its agreement to become a state university, it had to agree to give all the city public school students admission priority for the next few academic years. Given this mandate, the university became less strict on its admission standards for local public school students. The result was that I was offered admission, and since the tuition was so inexpensive, I decided to give it a try. But I asked if I could start in the winter term instead of the fall because I wanted to work just in case college was not for me.

I recall you said that you worked for the Post Office. So you didn't wind up in a steel mill?

Here is what happened. After graduation, I applied to some steel mills and the Post Office at around the same time. I was called for an interview at a steel mill. My father told me that they would probably offer me a laborer job in the blooming mill, the worst place to work because of the danger. This is where the hot steel was handled, and the combination of complex machinery, constant loud noise, and red-hot metal resulted in lots of accidents. Of course, that is

the job I was offered. I remember the interviewer saying that the job required working with hot metal, deep oil pits, dirty conditions, noise, and extremely dangerous equipment. He smiled and said, "So, do you think you would like to do that kind of work?" I told him, "No. I would not like doing that." He was somewhat taken aback, and asked if I was turning down the job offer. When I said that I would take the job, he seemed puzzled. "But you told me that you wouldn't like doing that kind of work." I said that anyone who liked to do that kind of work needs to be examined, but that I would do it since I needed a job. He did not seem happy with my explanation, but he gave me the job anyway. My dad said that they were usually desperate to fill those positions, so it was hard not to get an offer.

So you did work for a steel mill after all.

Once again, chance entered the scene. Since I was told to report to work the next Monday, I went home and bought a pair of steel-toed boots, a necessity for steel mill workers. The next day I got a call from the Post Office with an offer to be a mail clerk at the same hourly rate as the steel mill job. My choice was between the horrific working conditions in the blooming mill where extreme bodily damage was highly probable, or sorting one-ounce letters with the only danger being a paper cut.

An easy choice by all measures. I see how you wound up at the Post Office.

And since I did not want to quit the job at the end of summer, especially since I might not like university life, I asked to be admitted for the winter term. I was granted that option. When the winter term arrived, I registered for my classes and went to the bookstore. I was shocked. One of the courses required five books, and two other courses required three books. This was unexpected. I had never finished one book in an entire school year, and here I was expected to read multiple books in one semester.

What did you do?

I bought the books. Luckily, back then books were cheap. This was long before the book buyback system was introduced. Students generally kept their books, resulting in most college graduates having a small but useful home library. It was also a tangible connection to your degree.

Speaking of books, once upon a time books were physical things with physical pages and binding and glue and substantial front and back covers; things that you held in your hands. They had scents that you came to recognize and even sought out, perhaps a fine musty smell that brought back memories of certain passages in the book, passages that you could find because you remembered whether it was on a left-hand page or a right-hand page, or whether it was in the beginning, middle or end of the book. None of this is experienced with an eBook.

Of course we already saw this happen with mail. At one time, mail was a physical thing, delivered right to your door, perhaps affixed with colorful and exotic stamps from faraway places. Letter-writers attached part of their character and personality to the scrawl that you read repeatedly, not knowing when or if you would ever get another one. Now we have electronic mail. No paper, no handwriting in pencil, ink, or crayon to linger over. Sorry for the digression.

Not at all. I agree with your assessment. So, how did your first semester go?

I was completely overwhelmed. Daily homework, weekly quizzes, difficult exams, long written assignments, and the stark realization that I had to study to keep up. I was not amused.

How were your grades?

I was put on academic probation the first semester. And the second, and third semester as well. My assigned academic advisor said that although I had not yet achieved an overall GPA of 2.0, the minimum requirement to stay enrolled, I had kept creeping closer each semester, so they kept me on. Looking back, I believe it was because the university did not want to get rid of local students too soon after the university's admission into the state system. But after my fourth semester I managed to finally nudge past the 2.0 threshold.

That must have felt good.

It did. And as I said earlier, I liked hearing smart people discuss things in class. And although I did not grasp much of what my instructors were saying, I experienced glimmers of understanding, or at least I thought so, but I had a hard time reconstructing the ideas outside of class, so the thoughts had a short half-life. But since I accepted that what they were saying was important, I wanted to keep having that wash over me. And then one day in an introduction to philosophy class I said something—I do not recall what—and to my surprise, the teacher said that my remark was “interesting and probably right.” That experience was electric. It was the first time I thought that maybe I could fit into that world.

I don't know what to say. That's a lot to chew over. But perhaps we can return to your story about the quarterback.

Sorry. It is easy to get derailed.

Oh my, another train joke.