

Before we start I should just deal with the housekeeping.

I hope that everyone has signed in – that is our register in the event of a fire. Should the fire alarm go off there is a fire escape at the bottom of the stairs that we came up and also one at the stairs on the right at the end of this corridor. And we would meet in the car park. Should that happen please don't just wander off; I wouldn't want a fireman to needlessly put his life at risk.

There are toilets along this corridor and downstairs off the refectory, which is where we'll take refreshment.

Finally, a reminder that we do not charge for these talks so we will accept donations to cover expenses.

Now.

It is the tradition in the School to start all activities from stillness.

So I invite you all just to sit quietly for a few moments and let the body relax, to let the energies return to rest. And to let any thoughts or ideas to pass.

And now simply connect with the sense of touch – the weight of the feet on the floor, the body on the chair, the clothes on the skin, air on face and hands. Be in touch with the whole body. Here and now.

*Pause.*

Good

Thank you all for coming. The title of today's talk is Philosophy and Decision Making and I'm delighted that so many of you have made the decision to be here this morning. At least I'm saved the decision as to whether or not to talk to myself in an empty room!

If you have seen the advert for the talk you will know that the full title is

**Philosophy and Decision Making: What is the Right Action, Right Now?**

There are a number of implications in this title:

- There is a relationship between decision making and action
- There is such a thing as right action, and therefore right decision making – and by extension wrong decisions and wrong actions
- And, timing is important; it's the what do I do right now question

So in this talk this morning I'll be looking at each of these three topics and, on the assumption that we want our decision making to improve then I'll be suggesting some practical ways that we can make better decisions.

If not already obvious, we are making decisions all the time

Some we would say are conscious or deliberate – others seem automatic, instinctive and others happen before we're even aware that we've made them.

So for example, some of the decisions that we have made today:

- To come here
- What time to leave the house
- If driving, what route to take
- What speed to go
- Go through any amber lights?
- Parking spot to choose
- Where to sit

And now? We're still faced with decisions. For example:

- We could choose to listen with attention or not
- And with an open mind or not
- Mentally agreeing or disagreeing with what is being said
- We could be preparing our questions rather than listening
- We could decide to walk out

For this talk, I should also make it clear that I am really only looking at the process of decision making here, rather than the answers to specific decision questions. So, for example, I'm not going to tell you or even suggest how to vote on Thursday. I hope however that this talk may help at least some of us

understand better why we will vote the way we do – that may or may not change the way we vote.

This is important. Ultimately, every individual is responsible, moment by moment for the decisions that they make. Clearly we can be, and have been, influenced by many factors in our life – not just our upbringing, our culture, our parents and schooling, our life experiences; but also the external factors Such as advertising, the media, political campaigning.

I do not want to get into the nature versus nurture debate that might have led us to the current position that we find ourselves in – suffice to say that we each of us find ourselves in the “here, now” position. So not only are we each unique individuals but each moment is new and different.

You may be familiar with the saying of Heraclitus:

*“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.”*

I hope you realise that even now you are not the same people you were when you entered the room

Before we move on I should say something about why  
Philosophy and Decision Making.

Philosophy literally means Love of Wisdom. The student of  
Philosophy – which means all of us in the room (although  
obviously not just us) is seeking wisdom. We may not be able  
easily to define wisdom, although we all have some sense of it  
and recognise it when we see it.

It's not unreasonable to say that a wise person makes wise  
decisions – that are more likely to have good outcomes than  
unwise decisions.

But if we look at it from the other direction, then I contend that  
the decisions that we make, if they are right decisions, help us  
grow in wisdom.

Looked at another way, why is decision making relevant to our  
personal or spiritual journey?

Again, I contend that we all have unrealised potential We made  
decisions as children that we wouldn't as adults. Why is that?  
Our experiences are different; our values are different. And

hopefully as we live there is continual growth in experience and understanding. Which means, hopefully, that with that growth our decisions today don't have to be the same as the ones we made yesterday.

St Paul said:

*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.<sup>1</sup>*

The most widely accepted meaning of St Paul's use of "then" is that he is referring to some future beyond death. That may be; but could it also be an encouragement to continue to refine our observation so that we can see clearly now.

So the question for this talk is whether decisions we make can help us grow or, conversely, how they may limit us?

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12 King James Version (KJV)

Let's start with the relationship between decision making and action?

All decisions imply an action, emotionally, mentally or physically – and that action might be a “no change” action or the “do nothing” option.

Hence the statement from General Wellington that not making a decision is a decision.

A decision implies that there are two or more options:

- As simple as do I open the door or not?
- Or it could be which of two doors
- Or which of many doors

If there is no possibility of affecting the action or outcome, then there is no decision to be made. I cannot decide that the weather is going to be glorious for a picnic tomorrow; I cannot decide who is going to win the next rugby match; and being philosophical I cannot decide that I am going to live forever - but as a student of philosophy I can decide how I'm going to live.

It should also be clear that as soon as a decision is made all the other possible decisions that could have been made at that point in time have not been made. We are making the creation that we are living in with every decision and action that we take.

Science Fiction stories abound with parallel universes. And not just science fiction. There was a film not long ago called Sliding Doors<sup>2</sup> where a London woman's love life and career both hinge, unknown to her, on whether or not she catches a train. The film shows it both ways, in parallel. In real life we don't have that luxury.

As the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam says:

*"The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sliding Doors, 1998 starring Gwyneth Paltrow, John Hannah, John Lynch

<sup>3</sup> verse 51 of a 19th-century English translation of the mystic poetic work written in the 11th or 12th century

That's not to say that a decision cannot be reversed – but that would be a separate, a second decision.

And if we're being, what in common parlance is called, really indecisive, then we are just continuing to make rapid decisions that disagree with each other

What of the question of right decision, right action, right now? Many would ask if there is such a thing. If we had perfect and complete knowledge of all the factors involved – well, then we'd be God!

Nonetheless, we are all making decisions all the time and getting them right – or right-er – would be extremely useful.

We are going to look at the factors involved in making a decision in a little while but I thought it would be interesting just to look at a couple of dramatic examples – dramatic in the sense of drama, of plays.

There was, not long ago, a programme about the Greeks and what we've inherited from them.<sup>4</sup> In talking of Greek plays, Dr Scott said:

*Greek tragedy has given us some of the most strange, dark and brutal stories of all time. There are tales of murder, vengeance, and incest, of insanity and mutilation. ... These are bloody and violent stories but they are much more than some sort of weird form of entertainment for the ancient Greeks. They spoke to the dark side of humanity and to the harsh and unpredictable nature of life itself.*

*And here in the Greek theatre, these stories did something more than that as well. They were lessons. They were challenges.*

*My favourite line in Greek tragedy is in Aeschylus' Libation Bearers and it's when Orestes is about to get his revenge. He's there knife in hand, about to kill his mother and he*

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<sup>4</sup> BBC = Who were the Greeks? Dr Michael Scott, first shown 4 July 2013

*panics and asks the question "ti draso?" – "What shall I do?"*

*That is the key question of tragedy.*

*Tragedy didn't just tell a nasty story and let the audience walk away. No!*

*It asked them to respond, it challenged them. What would they do if they were caught in such an impossible situation?*

The same is in modern drama whether in theatre or film or TV.

One thing that makes a drama powerful is if the situation and the characters are believable and if we can relate to them and their situation. If I suggested to my mother seeing a film she wanted to know if it was a proper story, with real people.

So we can relate to the people and the situations they find themselves in.

You may have seen on television recently the TV play called King Charles III. Moment by moment each of the protagonists

are faced with choices and make decisions that affect their lives and ultimately the fate of the nation – potentially for generations.

We can comment on whether we think they've made the right decision in each circumstance – but the best dramas are where we ask ourselves what would we do if we were in such a situation.

Has anyone seen *Miss Saigon*, a modern retelling of *Madame Butterfly* – a very successful musical which considered the fate of the *bụi đời*<sup>5</sup>, illegitimate and abandoned mixed race offspring from the American troops stationed in Vietnam. You might say “an interesting story” and you may like the music but the more interesting question is “what would you do?”.

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<sup>5</sup> The Vietnamese term *bụi đời* ("dust of life") refers to [vagrants](#) in the city, or, *trẻ bụi đời* to [street children](#) or juvenile gangs. From 1989, following a song in the musical [Miss Saigon](#), "[Bui-Doi](#)"<sup>[1]</sup> came to popularly refer to [Amerasian](#) children left behind in Vietnam after the [Vietnam War](#).

What would you do if faced with:

- Being a single US soldier, would you choose to stay with your Vietnamese love and be captured, or leave Vietnam and her behind
- And would it have been different if you knew that she was pregnant
- And what would you do if, 6 years later, now happily married in America, you discovered that you had an illegitimate child in Vietnam
- And what would you do as the wife if you discovered that your husband had an illegitimate child from before you met him
- And what would you do if you were the mother of the illegitimate child and there was a possibility – if you gave him up – of him having the opportunity to live in America

I could go on and I haven't even talked of the Shakespearean tragedies – Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar etc. where the play hinges on decision making

Now, no-one is going to make a film about our life – but if they did, what would the audience think about the decisions that we make.

Actually no one is going to make a film because as it were we are already living the drama, where we are both protagonist and the audience. We are the star of our own show and at the same time we are looking at how the play unfolds.

So what is right action?

When we run the philosophy classes, having explained that the word philosophy means the love of wisdom, we ask what people understand by wisdom, what are its characteristics?

Now philosophers ancient and modern, academic or not, have written thousands of pages on the topic, so some might think it unfair to ask the question on day one of the course. To try and

make it practical we ask what are the characteristics of a wise person.

No list would be complete but typically answers include:

- They act from knowledge not ignorance
- They are open not closed
- They are compassionate and caring
- They listen
- Their advice and guidance is relevant and timely
- They do not criticise or cause harm
- They see the bigger picture
- They are not selfish

What is sometimes surprising when we look at the list is that there is nothing strange or esoteric on the list.

- If we change this to first person: I act from knowledge not ignorance
- I am open not closed
- I am compassionate and caring
- I listen
- My advice and guidance is relevant and timely
- I do not criticise or cause harm
- I see the bigger picture
- I am not selfish

We know how to act this way and sometimes we do – but that’s the caveat - for us it’s “sometimes”. For the wise it’s constant.

So one of the aims of practical philosophy is to help us recognise that we do have the capability to be wise, we have the talents and tools – but they need to be developed and strengthened through practice.

And so to the third aspect, **timing**. Before a decision is made it's in the future and the future is unreal, may never happen or at least not in the way we believe or imagine.

After the decision is made then it's in the past – and it's too late NOT to make the decision or to have made a different decision.

The only time that the decision can be made - in fact, the only time that it is made is now – in the present.

Now you may ask what if I decide that I'm going to do something tomorrow. Let's say meet a friend for lunch. Well clearly deciding now is a decision of sorts but it doesn't mean that you will be having lunch with your friend tomorrow; it's certainly more likely that you will be having lunch with your friend than if you decided now that you're not going to.

But:

- Just because you want to have lunch with her tomorrow doesn't mean she wants to have lunch with you
- She may want to but have a prior commitment

- Either of you could wake up sick tomorrow
- Or the car breaks down on the way
- Or between now and then something comes up that means you have to cancel
- Or you may simply forget

Etc. etc.

So to be actually sitting down having lunch with your friend will have involved a whole host of decisions, moment by moment, by you and many other people.

I'd like to describe a model that we can use for this morning's discussion.

Decisions take place in the mind.

Decisions are prompted by some stimulus: it could be an external stimulus, received through the senses. That is, we see, hear, feel (in the sense of touch), taste or smell something that prompts us to decide to do something.

Or the stimulus can come from within, as it were, from some memory or some emotion

Now the first challenge is that this stimulus may not be perceived accurately. I'm not talking about physical challenges, for example colour blindness or loss of hearing. Even if we are in perfect physical condition, with 20:20 vision and whatever the equivalent is for the other senses, we know that the senses are imperfect and don't represent the world as it is.

For example, a pencil in a glass of water looks bent A mirage in a desert may look like an oasis Things that are faraway look smaller

What's going on? What the physical senses perceive is interpreted by the mind – sometimes incorrectly because we don't understand the physical laws at work and sometimes because the image doesn't match our mental expectation. Which is why optical illusions work

More importantly, our mind is filled with noise – chatter and commentary, some of which appears to be relevant to what we're sensing but often as not totally irrelevant.

Here represented as fog. Similarly, with internal stimuli – vague memories, incorrectly interpreted feelings, bodily sensations. We might feel anxious but not know why. Again, I'm not talking about what might be termed clinical conditions – just the everyday which most of us experience from time to time.

We might feel agitated so that it is difficult to concentrate on anything for very long

We might feel that we've got too many things to do so that it's impossible to decide what to do, so we put off even starting – which just makes it worse

Etc. etc.

So our first challenge is how to receive and interpret these stimuli correctly.

But let's continue with the model

So we have some stimuli received and interpreted, correctly or incorrectly, and presented, as it were, to the decision making function of the mind.

What happens next?

What arises to meet the impression is our past: our past experiences and learnings, our value system and our beliefs; what we want to do and what we don't, our likes, dislikes and prejudices; all of which has come from the past. In this maelstrom of often conflicting sensations, emotions and desires somehow a decision is made.

And sometimes we don't make the right decision – I know that begs the question what is right but I'm going to park that for the moment and continue to look at the process of decision making.

Here's a model from the world of management consultancy, called a Boston square, to help us decide the sequence in which we should do all the things that we have to do.

On one axis is measured "Is it important?" – Yes and No are the values.

On the other axis is measured "Do I want to do it?" – Yes and No are the values.

Most people would instinctively do the items in Box 1 first – it's important and I want to do it. And the Items in Box 4 last – or never – it's not important and I don't want to do it.

But what about the other two boxes Objectively, we should do the ones that are important, even though I don't want to do them. But not surprisingly for many people the decision is to go

for Box 3. Anyone with kids will know the mantra “do your homework first and then you can play”

- So these are the three factors in our model: receiving and interpreting stimuli
- what is called on from our past, from our beliefs, values, experiences and emotions
- making the decision itself

So enough of the model; how do we make the right decision?

## **Investigate carefully, Decide correctly, Follow faithfully**

Here is a prescription, put forward by a 20<sup>th</sup> century sage based on an ancient text<sup>6</sup>. He says that it is a guide that can be applied both to our spiritual life and our every day life

- Investigate carefully
- Decide correctly
- Follow faithfully

Investigate carefully. Use all the resources that are available to us, in the timeframe.

This starts with the senses. Have I seen and heard things correctly? Did what I think happen actually happen?

We'll know that we often interpret what we have seen and heard in relation to me – even though we're often, maybe usually, wrong. Something is said and we take it, mistake it, personally

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<sup>6</sup> 1958. His Holiness Jagadguru Sankaracarya Sri Bharati Krsna Tirtha of Puri, went to America at the invitation of the Self Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles, to spread the message of Vedanta.

But it doesn't stop with the external senses. Is my memory of events correct? Am I relying on assumptions or worse prejudices? Is there more that I can do to find out?

There is a poem from Kipling *I kept six honest serving men*

*They taught me all I knew*

*Their names are **What**, and **Why** and **When**;*

*and **How** and **Where** and **Who**.*<sup>7</sup>

Take the time, if time allows, to look again, to look carefully.

This requires attention, patience and most importantly stillness of mind.

We need to cut through the fog that prevents us seeing clearly. We have to see the noisy commentary in the head as just that – noise.

It would be great if it wasn't there. And it does reduce with recourse to stillness. Coming to rest, as we practised at the beginning of the meeting, is a great help.

Practices such as prayer, meditation, songs of praise are beneficial. But so is any activity which allows the attention to rest where the work is taking place.

And just recognising this fog of noise to be just that, noise, is incredibly useful. In that recognition it loses its strength.

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<sup>7</sup> [Rudyard Kipling](#) (1865-1936)

It becomes more likely that we will see more clearly and not just through the glass darkly.

Then, **decide correctly**. Use the information to determine the most reasonable decision.

Is my decision influenced by my personal desires, fears, prejudices? Prejudice is an interesting word. It means that you've pre-judged. You've already decided the outcome before, as it were, you've heard the facts of the case. In a court of law, you wouldn't respect a judge who had made up his mind before hearing all aspects of a case – so why should we respect those decisions that we come to without due consideration.

Judges are interesting because of course they do have to give the reasons for their judgements. To read a judgement is often to read a well-reasoned argument – even if you don't agree with it. And of course judges don't always agree with each other – but it is possible to understand how they have reasoned to the decision they have come to.

This is important – just because you have come to the most reasonable decision doesn't mean that everyone will agree with you; more importantly, doesn't mean that you are right.

We need to ensure that we are using what we have discovered during the investigate carefully stage. If we don't then a) we have at least partly wasted our time investigating carefully if we're then not making use of it; and b) we are reinforcing our pre-existing assumptions, making it harder next time to escape their influence

Children's stories are sometimes good at describing common situations. If it's in simple language for children, then we might stand a chance of understanding it ourselves.

***The Phantom Tollbooth*** is a children's fantasy adventure [novel](#).<sup>8</sup> It tells the story of a bored young boy named Milo who unexpectedly receives a magic [tollbooth](#) one afternoon and, having nothing better to do, drives through it in his toy car, transporting him to the Kingdom of Wisdom, once prosperous but now troubled. There, he acquires two faithful companions, Humbug and Tock, and goes on a quest to restore to the kingdom its exiled princesses. The text is full of puns

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<sup>8</sup> ***The Phantom Tollbooth*** written by [Norton Juster](#) with illustrations by [Jules Feiffer](#), published in [1961](#) by [Random House](#) (USA).

and wordplay, and many events, explore the literal meanings of idioms. Here's one relevant to our talk today.

*The shore line was peaceful and flat, and the calm sea bumped it playfully along the sandy beach. In the distance a beautiful island covered with palm trees and flowers beckoned invitingly from the sparkling water.*

*"Nothing can possibly go wrong now," cried the Humbug happily, and as soon as he'd said it he leaped from the car, as if stuck by a pin, and sailed all the way to the little island.*

*"And we'll have plenty of time," answered Tock - and he, too, suddenly leaped into the air and disappeared.*

*"It certainly couldn't be a nicer day," agreed Milo. And in a split second he was gone also.*

*He landed next to Tock and Humbug on the tiny island, which now looked completely different. Instead of palms and flowers, there were only rocks and the twisted stumps*

*of long-dead trees. It certainly didn't seem like the same place they had seen from the road.*

*"Pardon me," said Milo to the first man who happened by; "can you tell me where I am?"*

*"To be sure," said Canby; "you're on the Island of Conclusions. Make yourself at home. You're apt to be here for some time."*

*"But how did we get here?" asked Milo, who was still a bit puzzled by being there at all.*

*"You jumped, of course," explained Canby. "That's the way most everyone gets here. It's really quite simple: every time you decide something without having a good reason, you jump to Conclusions whether you like it or not. It's such an easy trip to make that I've been here hundreds of times."*

*"But this is such an unpleasant-looking place," Milo remarked.*

*"Yes, that's true," admitted Canby; "it does look much better from a distance."*

So how do we challenge our thinking

It's too easy not to challenge our existing thinking; to assume that because **I'm** thinking it, it must be right.

Nonetheless, there are things that we can do, that are easily within our own power. If there weren't we might as well all go home now.

I said that I wasn't going to be talking about the election but if you want to make a reasonable decision as to who to vote for make sure that you listen to those who you don't want to vote for. Read the opposite newspapers: if your natural inclination is to vote left, read a right wing paper; if your natural inclination is to vote right, read a left wing paper, etc.

Make sure that your voting decision is rational and not habitual.

More generally – that is, not talking about elections any more - we can refer to the words of the wise: the teachings from the scriptures, for example, or the Greco-Roman philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Epictetus, or the more modern wise men

If we ever find ourselves in the position where the Bible, Plato, Shakespeare and others are saying one thing and yet I think something different, it would not be unreasonable to ask oneself, with due humility, who is more likely to be right – all of them or me (or in your case, you)

One can look at one's own value system and compare it to what the wise have given in us in various forms.

We will all be familiar with the **Golden Rule**: the principle of treating others as one would wish to be treated. It is found in many religions and cultures. The maxim may appear as either a positive or negative injunction governing conduct:

- Do to others what you would want them to do to you.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [Luke 6:31](#)

- "That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another."<sup>10</sup>

The Golden Rule is a unilateral moral commitment to the well-being of others without any expectation of anything in return.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, this would be a useful basis for valuation of all our decisions and actions – and maybe this is all we need.

Hillel says:

*"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.*

*That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."*<sup>12</sup>

But maybe it would be helpful to have more guidance.

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<sup>10</sup> "A Late Period Hieratic Wisdom Text: P. Brooklyn 47.218.135", Richard Jasnow, p. 95, University of Chicago Press, 1992, ISBN 978-0-918986-85-6.

<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia - The concept occurs in some form in nearly every religion<sup>[4][5]</sup> and ethical tradition.<sup>[6]</sup> It can also be explained from the perspectives of psychology, philosophy, sociology, human evolution, and economics. Psychologically, it involves a person [empathizing](#) with others. Philosophically, it involves a person perceiving their neighbor also as "I" or "self".<sup>[7]</sup> Sociologically, 'love your neighbor as yourself' is applicable between individuals, between groups, and also between individuals and groups. In evolution, "reciprocal altruism", is seen as a distinctive advance in the capacity of human groups to survive and reproduce, as their exceptional brains demanded exceptionally long child-hoods and on-going provision and protection even beyond that of the immediate family.<sup>[8]</sup> In [economics](#), Richard Swift, referring to ideas from [David Graeber](#), suggests that "without some kind of reciprocity society would no longer be able to exist."<sup>[9]</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Talmud, Shabbat 31a*

Many philosophies and seemingly all religions have a moral code, a code of ethics.

The ten commandments – do's and don'ts – seem common to the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam

And in most churches you can find examples of guidance, often directed at children – and good for us.

Goodness, Kindness, Gentleness, Faithfulness, Self-control, Joy, Love, Peace, Patience

If that's not enough, the Gītā has at least 36 values that can be practised.

As with our consideration of how a wise person would act – there's nothing mysterious or esoteric about these values.

It's just a case of practising them more – more wholeheartedly, more often.

And why are there so many – so that everyone can pick one or more that appeals to them.

The easy way, the natural way, is to follow those values that come naturally – and to develop them more fully.

### **Follow Faithfully**

We talked earlier about timing. Decisions are made now but the ensuing actions need to be carried through.

Philosophy is about wisdom and we're talking here about our own growth in wisdom, our own development.

You're here this morning because you made a decision some time ago to attend – and you've followed through; continually deciding to attend when alternatives presented themselves. It may have been easy – what could possibly keep you away from a talk like this – or there may have been challenges, either obstacles to overcome or alternative uses of your time. Each time the decision was reaffirmed, explicitly or implicitly, it is revalidating your value system.

So, even after a decision is made, there is a constant – or if not constant a frequent - opportunity to re-examine our beliefs and values.

I read once that Marcus Aurelius wrote that when on awakening if he felt like staying in bed he would say to himself "is this what I was born for? To stay under the covers?" It's good to know that even Emperors were tempted by the thought of duvet days!

It's not that being here is right or wrong but it does demonstrate our value system.

It's interesting to see what arises that might try and divert us. With a little self-examination we can see patterns of behaviour, habitual choices being made. They might be quite recognisable or quite subtle. Watch out for "it doesn't matter", or "I'll do it later" or "that's enough".

It's also fair to say that while some of these habits and behaviours may appear to be hidden from us, they may very well be manifestly obvious to people who know us well.

There may of course be valid reasons to change a decision; indeed, it is vital to keep our eyes open. Indeed, Sri Bharati Krsna Tirtha, who formulated "investigate carefully, decide

correctly, follow faithfully” recommended this. Because, as we know, things change from moment to moment. New information may come to light, circumstances may change or we may just realise that we made the wrong decision. Anyway, as he says, “investigate carefully, decide correctly, follow faithfully and keep your eyes open”. That is keep investigating carefully; don’t get locked into a fixed position. He describes this as a virtuous spiral leading ever upwards.

So following faithfully, while keeping our eyes open, is important. We need persistence, courage to keep going – although it may be a fine line between persistence and bloody mindedness. Hence the need to keep our eyes and our mind open.

The virtuous spiral does lead upward even if we discover that we have made wrong decisions. Actually it’s not whether or not the decision was wrong. But if we discover that we did not investigate as best as we could, or if we did not decide as correctly as we could have, or if we did not follow as faithfully

as we could have, then there is the possibility of improvement; of seeing what is operating, of understanding ourselves better.

A number of further points to make.

There are situations where we think we have made a decision but we haven't really - we're just fooling ourselves. Often in the category of, for want of a phrase, "I will be better tomorrow". It could be starting the diet or the exercise regime, or to read more, or practise meditation more faithfully, etc.

We have to be honest with ourselves.

If we have decided one thing but find ourselves doing another then actually we made a different decision, either deliberately or unconsciously. This can be a great opportunity for self-examination.

We do have to make a distinction between this scenario where you have actually made a different decision to the one that you intended and the scenario where you make a decision but say that you didn't want to. This may not be clear. The typical situation is at work when someone says "I really didn't want to

come to work today.” Well, clearly they did, because they are there.

Socrates and others, including me, contend that in every situation everybody always chooses to do what they want. They may wish that they had different choices but of the choices available – or at least what they believe are available – they, we, choose the most desirable. So when someone says that they didn’t want to come to work, actually they’re not speaking the truth. Coming to work was more attractive than not – because not going to work would have more undesirable consequences; using up holiday time or potentially getting the sack, etc.

Someone may wish that they were independently wealthy so they didn’t have to go to work. But that’s not something that we can arbitrarily decide.

I think this is important and resonates with the stoic view as put forward by Epictetus. To recognise what is within our control and what isn’t.

We can only make decisions about those things which are within our control – our beliefs, our reactions, our intentions. Everything else is not, or not wholly, within our control.

The student of philosophy, whether stoic or not, is concerned as much about their inner world as they are with the outer and their role in it.

Taking responsibility for our decisions is one of the first steps in developing wisdom; and growth in wisdom is actually up to us and, only up to us.

As the poem goes:

I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> William Ernest Henley (1849–1903). It was written in 1875 and published in 1888. Full poem see annex