# A Solution for Buridan's Ass*

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Buridan's Ass faced a choice between two identical bales of hay; governed only by reason, the donkey starved, unable to choose. It seems clear that we face many such cases, and resolve them successfully. Our success seems to tell against any view on which action and intention require evaluative preference. I argue that these views *can* account for intention and intentional action in cases like that of Buridan's Ass. A decision to act nonintentionally allows us to resolve these cases without their being a damaging theoretical counterexample.

## I. THE PROBLEM

The medieval Arabic philosopher-theologian Al-Ghazali described a choice between two identical alternatives:

> Suppose two similar dates in front of a man who has a strong desire for them, but who is unable to take them both. Surely he will take one of them through a quality in him, the nature of which is to differentiate between two similar things. All the distinguishing qualities . . . like beauty or nearness or facility in taking, we can assume to be absent, but still the possibility of the taking remains.[1]

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1. Al-Ghazali, *Tahafut Al-Falasifah*, trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963), 26–27. The precise date of composition is unknown, though estimated at 1095; see, e.g., Maurice Bouyges, "Notice," in Algazel [Al-Ghazali], *Tahafot Al-Falasifat* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1927), ix. Al-Ghazali's lifetime was 1058–1111. I use

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Faced with two pieces of fruit, Al-Ghazali's imagined man can find no difference between them on which to base his choice. They are equally beautiful, equally close and convenient, and, we can assume, equally tasty, healthy, and so on. But he is nevertheless able to take one. Al-Ghazali insists that we are able to choose between such alternatives.

Al-Ghazali's dates are an earlier variant of an example that became famous as Buridan's Ass. The imagined ass, or donkey, finds itself hungry midway between two equally sized bundles of hay. Unable to choose, it dies of starvation. The example, though not found in John Buridan's writings, is widely thought to have arisen as an objection to his view of the will as determined by reason.[2] Though the donkey dies and Al-Ghazali's man does not, a single lesson can be drawn from either case. If the donkey and the man could act only as reason commands, it seems, they would starve; they in fact would not starve; so they must be able to act other than as reason commands.

Al-Ghazali's example is not only earlier than Buridan's, but also clearer and more relevant. The introduction of a donkey raises questions about whether nonhuman animals can act intentionally, act at all, or have intentions, beliefs, or a will, which are not essential to this particular problem. And although death is a dramatic feature of the example, and makes for a vivid caricature, it can obscure the issue. What Buridan would need to show is not just that the donkey will not die. He would need to show how, if it does succeed in eating one of the hay bundles, it does so under the command of reason. Al-Ghazali's example raises this problem directly. The man seems able to select and eat, without reason or rationality commanding either alternative.

Nevertheless, since later writers have mostly focused on Buridan, I will refer to these as "Buridan cases." It will be helpful to try to include a wide range of cases that raise the same basic problem. As I will use the term, a *Buridan case* is a case in which a person has multiple available courses of action, which she believes to have no differences between them relevant for belief about which one she ought to take, and each of which she would choose over any available action other than these. To

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Simon van der Bergh's translation from Averroes, *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2008), 1:18–23, a detailed twelfth-century commentary on and refutation of Al-Ghazali. For further discussion, see Nicholas Rescher, "Choice without Preference," *Kant-Studien* 51 (1959): 146–50.

2. For discussion, see Rescher, "Choice without Preference," 153–55. Buridan lived from circa 1300 until shortly after 1358, roughly 250 years after Al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali's example arose in the context of an attack on the analogous view to Buridan's but about divine will—the principle of sufficient reason for God's actions—and thus in defense of the rational inscrutability of God's actions.

Although, as I go on to say, Al-Ghazali's is a more useful example, I do change it slightly. I ignore his talk of desire, adapting the example to focus on intention, and I will occasionally consider a variant in which the dates are not exactly identical.

*resolve* a Buridan case, we can say, is to perform one of these equally preferred actions.[3]

Buridan cases present a practical problem: the problem of how to act when no single alternative seems to be better, or more worthy of choice, or the one we ought to take. They are not the only cases that raise this problem. In other situations, our alternatives can seem only roughly equally worthy of choice, or on a par, or we might find ourselves unable to reach an evaluation at all.[4] In Sartre's classic example, a young man had to choose between joining the French Resistance and staying to care for his mother.[5] There were many clearly relevant differences between his alternatives, but the young man still found himself unable to conclude that he ought to take one or the other. His alternatives can seem to him and to us to be beyond comparison, rather than equally good. Part

3. A few terminological clarifications will help here. I will sometimes call a belief that one ought to do something a "normative" belief, in contrast to a factual one, and will occasionally use "should" interchangeably with "ought." By "person" I mean a being capable of intention and belief, of any biological species or physical kind. "Multiple" allows cases with more than two potential actions, such as picking a card from a deck; there is no need to assume that Buridan cases must be binary. "Courses of action" leaves open the possibility of Buridan cases that are not cases of taking an object; they might, for example, be cases of sending garbage away for disposal to one of three equidistant dumps, or of singing one of a series of notes. The focus on "believed" difference is important; a mistaken factual belief about actually identical alternatives could easily allow a person to form a belief that she ought to take one particular, apparently best option. "Relevant" allows for obviously irrelevant differences: though cases of clearly identical alternatives are the clearest cases, a choice between dates arbitrarily labeled "8371" and "8713," or with beliefs about which one is farther west, would still present a problem if the differences are believed irrelevant to belief about which one we ought to take. On the other hand, it does make a difference that the alternatives not be accompanied by another one that the chooser believes she should take instead. If Buridan's Ass saw a bigger hay bundle closer than the others, or Al-Ghazali's man saw a third, tastier-looking date, there would no longer be a problem. It would be easy for the man to form the belief that he ought to take the third date. This is why I demarcate the range of Buridan cases the way I do, though other kinds of cases can be closely related.

We can give names to some related types of cases. A *binary Buridan case*, as Al-Ghazali's man and Buridan's Ass both are, is a Buridan case with only two options with no differences believed relevant for normative belief. An *objective Buridan case*, we can say, is a case in which the alternatives in question are in fact identical in all relevant respects, not merely believed identical. An *indiscernibility case* is a Buridan case in which the preferred options are not believed to be different in any way, rather than believed identical in every way relevant for choice. As I define them, Buridan cases do not have to be binary, objective, or indiscernibility cases.

4. For influential discussions of rough equality, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 431ff.; and James Griffin, *Well-Being* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 80–81 and 96–98. A useful sampling of work on incomparability is collected in Ruth Chang, ed., *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), with a highly substantive and especially useful introduction by Chang. Chang's "The Possibility of Parity," *Ethics* 112 (2002): 659–88, *Making Comparisons Count* (New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. chap. 5, and "Parity, Internal Value, and Choice," *Ethics* 115 (2005): 331–50 argue for a distinct relation of parity; for criticism, see Joshua Gert, "Value and Parity," *Ethics* 114 (2004): 492–520.

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Wisdom Library, 1957), 24–25.

of the interest of Buridan cases is in their illustration of a more widespread experience of being 'stuck' between alternatives, and in the potential applicability of an understanding of Buridan cases to an improved understanding of cases of rough equality, parity, and incomparability. I will focus here on Buridan cases. But their similarity with a broader range of difficult choices is one of the motivations for considering Buridan cases in detail.

The theoretical problem raised by Buridan cases is again highly general. It does not depend on a particular conception of the will or of reason, and it can be formulated without using those notions at all. It arises about action, and also about intention, and about what we do intentionally. If we insist that we can only *intend* to do what we believe we ought to do, then, in Michael Bratman's words, "we have our Buridan problem. It seems that I can just decide on which bookstore to go to, while continuing to see each option as equally desirable."[6] As Bratman put it in an earlier consideration of Buridan's Ass: "I conjecture that we have an ability that is basic at the level of commonsense psychology: an ability to decide in the face of equidesirability."[7] The examples of the dates, hay bundles, or bookstores are apparent cases of what he calls "underdetermination by value judgment."[8] And in these cases, our intentions and intentional actions seem as underdetermined as our actions more generally. Imagine the dates a short walk away; the man can form an intention to take the one on the left, walk over to it, and intentionally take it—all apparently without believing that he ought to take that one and not the other one.

Examples like these are a problem for any view that holds that intention or intentional action requires a belief that one ought to act a certain way. Such a view is often thought to be too "intellectualized," attributing too much cognitive sophistication to our basic practical attitudes. An accusation of overintellectualization seems especially fair in the case of animal action and nonintentional movement. But I think it can be answered in Al-Ghazali's case, and for intention and intentional action in general. Since it is useful to have a label, we can call the analogous view

> *Intellectualism*: We can intend to do, and can intentionally do, only what we believe we ought to do.

My aim in this essay is to offer a defense of intellectualism in the face of Buridan cases, while also shedding light on the details of our actions in

6. Michael Bratman, "Davidson's Theory of Intention," in *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 209–24, 220.

7. Michael Bratman, *Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 11.

8. Michael Bratman, "A Desire of One's Own," in *Structures of Agency: Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137–61, 161.

such cases. If intellectualism can be reduced to absurdity, it is not, I will argue, by examples such as that of Buridan's Ass.[9]

In the next section, I consider four responses an intellectualist can make to Buridan cases. One can: (1) deny that there are any such cases; (2) concede that they cannot be successfully resolved; (3) insist that we simply select at random; or instead, (4) say that we simply let our attention fall on one of the alternatives, and take that one. I will argue that all of these responses fail to account for at least some intentions and intentional actions in Buridan cases. In Section III, I describe a different view: that in a typical intentional resolution of a Buridan case, we decide to act nonintentionally until one of the available alternatives emerges as the one we ought to take. In Sections IV–VII, I argue that the decision to act nonintentionally succeeds where the other responses fail, offering a solution to both the practical and the theoretical problem posed by Buridan cases.

## II. INITIAL RESPONSES

### *A. Denying the Phenomenon*

Are there Buridan cases? It can seem natural to just deny the phenomenon. Montaigne, for example, wrote: "'Tis a pleasant imagination to fancy a mind exactly balanced betwixt two equal desires. . . . Nothing presents itself to us wherein there is not some difference, how little soever; and . . . either by the sight or touch, there is always some choice, that, though it be imperceptibly, tempts and attracts us."[10] Leibniz similarly wrote: "Buridan's ass . . . is a fiction that cannot occur in the universe. . . . For the universe cannot be halved by a plane drawn through the middle . . . so that all is equal and alike on both sides. . . . There will therefore always be many things in the ass and outside the ass, although they be not apparent to us, which will determine him to go on one side rather than the other."[11] It can be tempting to follow Montaigne and

9. I mean to remain neutral here with respect to more particular forms of intellectualism. On one view, an intention is itself a normative belief; on another, the belief necessarily "accompanies" the intention. Whether the belief is an accompaniment or is partly or wholly constitutive of the intention itself is a further question, and I take the solution I offer to be available to either version of intellectualism.

10. Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton (London: Reeves & Turner, 1877), 2:381–82, the one-page essay "That the mind hinders itself."

11. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 150 (§49). Though this is not usually noticed, both Montaigne and Leibniz combine the first two responses I mention; see below. The quotations from Montaigne and Leibniz also appear in part in Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing," *Social Research* 44 (1977): 759–60, who take them to be examples of denying that there are situations of "strictly indifferent preferences" (759). But as they and I go on to clarify, a situation can be one of "indifferent preferences" even when the options are not in themselves identical.

Leibniz in denying the possibility of Buridan's Ass. And if there is no such phenomenon, it seems, there is nothing problematic to explain.

Such a denial is on shaky ground, for several reasons. First, even if there are no actual Buridan cases, one might wonder what intellectualism can say about merely imagined cases. Second, the unperceived differences Montaigne and Leibniz consider might help show only that the donkey and the man can avoid starvation. This would not show that they act on normative beliefs. A slight difference might lead Al-Ghazali's imagined man to take the date on the left, without his believing he ought to take that one. Third, a simple denial that there are such cases tends to be unclear about what kind of example is at issue. To create a problem, it is enough that the chooser can see no *relevant* difference.[12] Buridan cases can involve unnoticeable and even noticeable differences, as long as these present no apparent basis for normative belief.[13]

Fourth, and most importantly, the denial flies in the face of the apparent fact that there are Buridan cases. When we take one dime from a pile, or card from a deck, or piece of candy from a tray, or box of cereal in a grocery store aisle, we seem able to act intentionally. We also seem able to form a corresponding intention in advance: "In a minute I'll take *that* card." And we seem to do this without believing we ought to take *that* card, or this piece of candy. There are many such cases that seem to cast doubt on intellectualism. As Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser put it: "Supermarket shelves supply us with paradigmatic examples. . . . Having eliminated from among the rows upon rows of Campbell tomato soup cans the less conveniently accessible ones as well as the conspicuously damaged ones, you are still facing at least two cans neither of which is discernibly superior to the other(s)."[14] Cases

12. Though this is not crucial here, Leibniz's symmetrical universe is not only not necessary for a Buridan case, but not sufficient, either. Buridan cases require a *believed* or apparent lack of relevant difference between alternatives, whether or not there is an actual one.

13. There is an intermediate possibility: an intellectualist could insist that an imperceptible difference causes a normative belief. In other words, the difference could cause the belief itself, without being a reason for it. The normative belief might be held without reasons. I do not rule out this possibility here. But I avoid insisting that all apparently Buridan-like cases are resolved in this way. That is an unlikely strategy. For one thing, if someone does form a normative belief in this way, she could reflect on her belief, find no reason for it, give it up, and be back in the same situation. It is far from clear that imperceptible differences could always give rise to motivationally effective normative belief in such a brute way. Moreover, if they did, it would be hard to avoid the implication that the belief (and therefore the intention) is irrational, and that all of our responses to Buridan-like cases must be irrational. I consider the rationality of our responses to these cases in Sec. VI below.

14. Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing," 761. For the contrasting view that genuine 'motivational ties' are rare, see Alfred Mele, "Motivational Ties," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 16 (1991): 431–42, and *Springs of Action: Understanding Intentional Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 67–78. I partly agree with Mele in Sec. VII below. Mele's discussion considers Buridan cases in the context of a discussion of motivational strength, and thus addresses a somewhat different problem.

like these still need to be accounted for. A denial of their existence is a desperate move with a dubious theoretical motivation. The question remains: how do we manage to form an intention to take one alternative, when we can see no way to come to a belief about which one we should take?

*B. Biting the Bullet*

A second response is that we do not manage it: intention and intentional action in such cases is impossible. Aristotle suggested such a view in passing in his mention of "the man who, though exceedingly hungry and thirsty, and both equally, yet being equidistant from food and drink, is therefore bound to stay where he is."[15] Buridan himself can be imagined to have made this response, and he would have had respectable followers. Montaigne, while denying the phenomenon, accepts that it would have a disastrous outcome. "Were we set betwixt the bottle and the ham, with an equal appetite to drink and eat, there would doubtless be no remedy but we must die of thirst and hunger."[16] Like Montaigne, Leibniz added: "It is true that, if the case were possible, one must say that the ass would starve himself to death."[17] Concluding part II of his *Ethics*, Spinoza wrote of a similar example: "I readily grant that a man placed in such a state of equilibrium . . . would die of hunger and thirst. If they ask me whether such a man is not to be reckoned an ass rather than a man, I reply that I do not know, just as I do not know how one should reckon a man who hangs himself, . . . [or] babies, fools and madmen."[18] Spinoza admits the puzzle; he does not quite know what to make of the example. But he thinks it no less real than infancy or suicide or insanity. In his picture of the world, there can be Buridan cases, but we are simply unable to choose between the alternatives in those cases.

This second response is what we would now call "biting the bullet." While the first response denies the possibility of Buridan's Ass, this one takes the donkey's plight as paradigmatic of what happens in such cases. It denies, not the existence of Buridan cases, but the possibility of their resolution—that is, of performing one of the candidate actions. But like the first response, the second one depends on a denial that is hard to sustain. There are again several reasons to resist it.

First, there is the lack of a clear rationale for the response. There seems to be no reason to accept that the donkey or the man will starve,

15. Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 486; the passage comes from *On the Heavens*, bk. II, chap. 13, 295b31–34 in the standard Bekker pagination.

16. Montaigne, *Essays*, 2:381.

17. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 150.

18. Baruch Spinoza, *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 276.

except as the consequence of a theory. But we can ask: is it a consequence of our theory? I will soon explain why it is not, if the theory is intellectualism.

Second, to be convincing, a response like this would need to explain why examples like Buridan's Ass seem so absurd. Why would the donkey's plight strike people as absurd enough to tell against a general theory that condemns him to it? Spinoza's analogies can make this question even more pressing. Infants, fools, and madmen all lack full rationality, intelligence, or judgment. Why would an ordinary adult be reduced to the state of a paralyzed donkey when put into a Buridan case? Spinoza's puzzlement makes his own view harder to accept. It offers no explanation of the apparent absurdity.

Third, and most importantly, this response, like the first one, seems to fly in the face of what we already know. If it is obvious that there are Buridan cases, it seems equally obvious that there are resolutions of them. As Al-Ghazali would insist, we do in fact choose between two dates, or between food and drink, or between two equidistant bundles of hay, or between many cans on a supermarket shelf. This is part of the power of Buridan cases. They seem imaginable and even widespread; and they seem resolvable. It seems clear that deliberation can reach a tie, without paralyzing the deliberator. It then seems that we can form intentions, and act intentionally, even when there is no way to form a belief that we ought to take the option we intend to take.

### *C. Randomization*

Intellectualism does not have to deny either that there are Buridan cases, or that we can successfully resolve them. But what is the alternative?

According to Nicholas Rescher, when faced with what he calls "the problem of choice in the absence of preference, . . . *random selection is the only reasonable procedure.*"[19] There is no defensible basis for favoring any particular alternative, so the remaining option is to select at random.

This too is not an easy fix. To begin with, what does "random" mean? If it means "arbitrary," which in turn means "without a reason," it seems that, by hypothesis, any solution will count as random. The response is empty unless it uses "random" in a narrower, more interesting sense.

It is natural to think of random selection as selection using a randomizing device, such as a coin or die.[20] Donald Davidson points to a

19. Rescher, "Choice without Preference," 170.

20. In "Choice without Preference," Rescher credits the seventeenth-century British scholar and theologian Thomas Gataker with being "the first to suggest the employment of random-selection devices as a means of resolving the problem of indifferent choices" (156),

coin toss as a preferred method of resolution: "Sometimes we have to decide even when there are no obvious grounds for decision. But if there is reason to reach some decision, we find extrinsic grounds. Perhaps I flip a coin to decide. My need to choose has caused me to prefer the alternative indicated by the toss; a trivial ground for preference, but a good enough one in the absence of others."[21] A coin toss, Davidson thinks, can indicate one alternative to us, breaking the apparent tie.

But the use of randomizing devices can face a regress of Buridan cases. *Which* device shall I use? If I have a coin and a die, or five coins, I might see no relevant difference between them. How shall I determine which one to use? Do I use one of the devices I have for that too? Which one? The choice among random selection procedures can itself be a Buridan case, which we can be unable to solve except by resolving the same case in some other way.

There is a second, more vicious regress, which arises even with one coin. Flipping a coin and watching it fall does nothing, unless the available actions are matched to the possible outcomes of the coin toss. To use the coin, a person must first decide whether to take the date or hay bundle on the left if the coin comes up heads, or if it comes up tails. But of course, this makes no difference. There is no reason for assigning left to heads that is not also a reason for assigning it to tails. We can call this the *matching problem.* Given a coin or a die, Al-Ghazali's man would have to match its outcomes to the alternatives it is meant to help him choose between. Rolling a die would not help; the man would still have to decide which outcomes of the die call for which alternative matching. Nor would it help to have a preference for, say, tails in coin tosses. Even if the man likes tails more than heads, which date should he match to it? If he is in a Buridan case, he will see no reason to match his favored tails to the left date that does not apply to the right date. The matching problem points to a Buridan case within the resolution of any Buridan case using a coin or die. It thus leaves at least some resolutions of Bur-

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and takes inspiration from him in his own view. For more recent discussion, see the papers collected in Peter Stone, ed., *Lotteries in Public Life: A Reader* (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint, 2011), as well as Peter Stone, *The Luck of the Draw: The Role of Lotteries in Decision-Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). It is worth noting that, for the purposes of a Buridan case, 'randomizing' devices do not need to be truly random in any statistical sense. We would not be upset to find out afterward that the dice were loaded or the coin 'biased' toward heads. We just need to delegate choice to something that does not have to 'choose' for a reason. For the same reason, the use of a mental 'randomizer', discussed below, is not jeopardized by the possibility of implicit bias. From the deliberator's point of view, the alternatives are equally good, and it does not matter whether any randomizing process is, unbeknownst to her, weighted in advance toward a particular outcome.

21. Donald Davidson, "Reply to Michael Bratman," in *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events*, ed. Bruce Vermazen and Merrill B. Hintikka (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 195–201, 200.

idan cases unaccounted for. Even when we do flip a coin, we must also exercise an independent capacity to resolve Buridan cases.[22]

### *D. The Appeal to Attention*

The sixth-century Aristotelian commentator Simplicius, discussing a Buridan case, wrote that the protagonist "will choose whatever he first happens on."[23] In this context, "happens on" can suggest randomness or chance, and also encounter or focus: the man in Al-Ghazali's example can "choose whatever he first happens on," by taking whichever date his attention turns to first. Is this an answer to the Buridan problem?

The appeal to attention is attractive. It seems recognizable as something we in fact do in Buridan cases: we do often let our attention fall on one date, or card, or bundle of hay, and take that one. The appeal to attention also seems to avoid the problems with the other responses. It avoids denying the phenomenon of Buridan cases, without conceding that we cannot resolve them. And it offers attention as a mental 'randomizer'. Attention seems to let us delegate our choice to something other than deliberation, without raising the problem of matching acts to outcomes.

Nevertheless, there is still the problem of *how* to use attention. Al-Ghazali's man might wonder: do I let my mind wander, or my gaze, or

22. The matching problem also raises the interesting question of why we bother with the coin. I leave aside here the utility of coins and dice, and of other randomizing devices, such as lottery machines, that might not create a matching problem.

For earlier mentions of regress problems for randomization, including what I call the matching problem, see Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Textes Inédits*, ed. Gaston Grus (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), 488, quoted in Lloyd Strickland, "God's Problem of Multiple Choice," *Religious Studies* 42 (2006): 141–57, 151; Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing," 757–85, 769–70; and Michael M. Stöltzner, "An Auxiliary Motive for Buridan's Ass: Otto Neurath on Choice without Preference in Science and Society," *Conceptus* 33 (2000): 23–44, 28, a discussion of Otto Neurath, "The Lost Wanderers of Descartes and the Auxiliary Motive," in *Philosophical Papers 1913–1946* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), 1–12. Joe Mintoff, "Buridan's Ass and Reducible Intentions," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26 (2001): 207–21, 213, also points out the problem, rejects "various suggestions" (212) for resolving it, and concludes that it is decisive, but without considering the solution I go on to describe.

In "Choice without Preference," Rescher goes on to suggest that we adopt a random "*policy* of choice" (168), as a way to avoid regress. This, of course, does not account for cases like Al-Ghazali's, in which we do not yet have a policy and nevertheless face a Buridan case—or more generally, cases in which a person faces a matching problem. For more detailed criticism of Rescher's appeal to policies, see Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing." Rescher also suggests that the randomizing instrument "may . . . be the human mind, since men are capable of making arbitrary selections" (169). As mentioned earlier, this response is so far empty, since any resolution of a Buridan case is in a sense arbitrary. But the response I go on to give will be a way of developing the notion of a mental randomizer.

23. Simplicius, *Simplicii in Aristotelis de Caelo Commentaria*, in *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, ed. I. L. Heiberg (Berlin: Royal Prussian Academy, 1984), 7:534. I use Rescher's translation; see Rescher, "Choice without Preference," 145. See also Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing," 774.

use some more particular, quirky method? And when am I done? What should I count as my attention fully falling on an option? Should I stop when I am looking at one of the dates, or when I'm closer to one, or when I feel a greater inclination toward one? Should I take whichever one my attention falls on next, or, instead, the last one I attended to before I understood that I see no relevant difference between the alternatives? The mere thought of using attention leaves unspecified the way of using it.

There is also a problem concerning *whether* to use attention. This problem is that there can be other ways of resolving a Buridan case. Al-Ghazali's man can do a dance, and take whichever date he ends up closer to. Or he can throw sugar at both and take whichever has more sugar on it. Or he can ask someone else to do one of these things. If it occurs to him that he has these options, letting attention fall on one date might look like one possibility among others. Any of them might work, and he might not see any difference between them relevant for belief about which one he ought to take. He is then back in a Buridan case, of a kind it seems we are able to resolve. Even the appeal to attention leaves some resolutions of Buridan cases unaccounted for.[24]

### *E. Desiderata for an Adequate Response*

Though none of these initial responses are adequate, considering them brings out more clearly what an adequate intellectualist response would have to do. To successfully account for intention in Buridan cases, intellectualism must meet

> *The Exhaustiveness Condition*: Account for *all* intention and intentional action in Buridan cases.

24. Though I have considered four representative responses, I do not claim that they are exhaustive. Sergio Tenenbaum, for example, suggests an alternative, on which "some inferences can be merely permissible"; see Sergio Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good: An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 70, and for further development, Sergio Tenenbaum, "Minimalism about Intention: A Modest Defense," *Inquiry* 57 (2014): 384–411. Though Tenenbaum's topic is judgments of goodness, one could extend his view to insist that it can be permissible in a Buridan case to simply infer that one ought to take, say, the bale on the left. Perhaps, then, we can directly form an intention in a Buridan case by making such an inference.

Even if such inferences are permissible, this response is again likely to leave some intentional resolutions of Buridan cases unaccounted for. For example, people who do not already hold Tenenbaum's view might not allow themselves to make such inferences. They then need another kind of resolution, and might be forced to the one I go on to describe. In any case, I consider the four responses in the text mainly to characterize the challenges a response must meet in order to be successful. As I go on to say, intellectualism can allow for various kinds of resolution of a Buridan case. If it is possible, directly inferring that one ought to take the bale on the left would be one such example. The availability of such an alternative strategy would, I believe, still allow the one I go on to describe, and would sometimes require it.

Intellectualism does not have to insist that we resolve all Buridan cases in one particular way. But it cannot leave *any* intention or intentional action that is clearly held or performed in the absence of a corresponding normative belief.

None of these initial responses meet the Exhaustiveness Condition. Denying the phenomenon ignores Buridan cases altogether; biting the bullet ignores our intentions in Buridan cases; appeals to randomization or attention cannot account for our resolution of cases in which we must decide how or whether to use these strategies. The last two responses, though more promising, leave some paradigmatic Buridan cases unaccounted for, and so cannot meet the Exhaustiveness Condition either.

Considering these responses suggests what a successful one must do. The response must address apparent Buridan cases and their resolution, in a way that captures how we handle them and leaves no Buridan cases unaccounted for. It should, ideally, also allow that our intentions in such cases can be ones which we can reasonably defend. *Pace* Spinoza, our handling of Buridan cases does not seem like suicide, idiocy, or madness, and we should be able to explain or at least allow the rationality of intentions in such cases, at least in principle.

To successfully address Buridan cases, it seems, intellectualism should:

1. allow that there are genuine (real or imagined) Buridan cases;
2. allow that we can form intentions and act intentionally when faced with them;
3. show how some activity of ours allows us to resolve such cases;
4. show how the activity is not intention formation *without* normative belief;
5. recognizably describe our intentions and actions in such cases;
6. meet the Exhaustiveness Condition; and
7. avoid the conclusion that intention and action in such cases must be irrational.

I will try to develop a response that satisfies all of these desiderata.

## III. DECIDING TO ACT NONINTENTIONALLY

Like the appeal to attention, I think it is right to look to a process that is mental but not intentional to explain the resolution of Buridan cases. But it is important to appreciate the philosophical significance of the fact that there is often more than one such process available for intention to rely on. I think the key to a solution is to not insist that we settle on *any* particular nonintentional process. There is no one particular process or strategy that we always intend to use. And when forming an intention in a genuine Buridan case, I think we do not need to inten-

tionally make use of any particular way of going about it. We can simply *decide to act nonintentionally.*

The category of nonintentional action is familiar. We doodle, we pace while thinking, we hum, and we dodge oncoming objects. When asked why we are doing these things, we would often answer that we are not doing them intentionally.[25]

Of course, if we decide to do one of these things, it is normally done intentionally.[26] If we do form an intention to hum the Marseillaise, the humming seems no less intentional than anything else we do.

But we can also form an intention to do something nonintentionally. We can notice ourselves doodling or pacing intentionally, and take our attention off it to let it continue nonintentionally. Some sports players place enormous importance on letting much of their throwing, dribbling, or running be nonintentional. They know that they do worse when, as one sports psychologist put it, "They start to overthink something that should really be reflexive. . . . It destroys their ability to do what they have been practicing so long."[27] Although we sometimes try only to deliberate less, rather than act nonintentionally, we can also intend to do something 'reflexively', without intention. As one climber put it: "Somehow the right thing is done without you ever thinking about it or doing anything at all. . . . It just happens."[28] When a climber decides to put herself in such a state, she is, among other things, deciding to go on without intention, or let her finely tuned bodily abilities run their course.[29]

25. The contrast is sometimes drawn in other ways. Harry Frankfurt and David Velleman, for example, draw a distinction between action and mere activity, on which, for example, "idly and inattentively" drumming one's fingers on a table (Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," in *The Importance of What We Care About* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 58–68, 58) or scratching one's head (J. David Velleman, "Introduction," in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* [Oxford: Clarendon, 2000], 1–31, 2) count as activity but not as action. In my usage, the drumming or scratching would be an action, though not one that we perform intentionally. If we reserve 'action' for intentional actions, the solution I offer can be redescribed in terms of nonintentional activities, behavior, or processes.

I do not mean "nonintentional" to carry any connotation of being accidental, unwanted, or against one's will, as "unintentional" sometimes suggests. For this contrast, see Aristotle, *Complete Works*, 1752–55, for his distinction between the involuntary and the nonvoluntary in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. III, chap. I.

26. Although "decide" can be used in various ways, I will use it as shorthand for 'form an intention'. Here I follow a common usage on both sides of the debate; a useful list of references is provided in Mintoff, "Buridan's Ass and Reducible Intentions," 219 n. 5.

27. The quote is from Dr. Shawn Harvey, quoted in Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 80.

28. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 63.

29. I will not settle the issue of whether it is possible to decide to do something nonintentionally, and to act nonintentionally on that intention, or only to decide to *let*

Just as we can form an intention to act nonintentionally, we can follow through intentionally on an already begun and so far nonintentional movement. We can stop at a crosswalk, lost in thought, and then find ourselves halfway across the street with a "Walk" sign in front of us. Whether we find this frightening or natural, we tend to keep walking, thinking of ourselves as intentionally continuing a crossing that we started "on autopilot." We have the capacity to intentionally complete a movement that we find ourselves in the middle of. And, of course, we can respond intentionally to a nonintentional action of ours without continuing the action. Finding myself halfway across the street, I might turn back, remembering that I do not intend to take my normal route this time.

In some cases, we can both intend to act nonintentionally, and intentionally continue or react to a nonintentional movement. When I was in college, I often sat by the river to relax and clear my mind. At first I tried to think about how long would be enough, but I could not settle on any particular length of time. The best solution I could find was to trust my instincts. I decided not to go home until I noticed that I had already gotten up and started walking. This usually took about an hour. Whenever the idea of going home occurred to me, I would stay sitting on the grass. But when I noticed that I was already walking, I would continue, trusting my standing up as a sign that I was ready. I had a policy of intentionally walking home when I noticed that I had nonintentionally started walking home.

In this series of events, there are several potential objects of explanation. There is the initial decision, to go home when I notice that I've already started walking. Then there is my standing up and beginning to walk. And finally, there is the complete action of walking home. Intellectualism has different implications for each explanation. For intellectualism, the initial decision—if we think of a decision as the formation of an intention—requires the formation of a normative belief. I come to believe: that I should go home when I notice that I've already started walking. This belief can be justified as an application of my policy, and there can be disagreement about whether the strategy is a good one. One can think of the strategy as a smart way to trust my instincts and remove distracting thoughts about when to go home—or as

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oneself act nonintentionally, believing a particular nonintentional action will be the result. I am inclined to think we cannot act nonintentionally 'on' an intention to do something in particular; but this issue does not arise here, since the intention I am attributing in Buridan cases is simply the intention to act nonintentionally in one way or another. On the other hand, if we cannot act nonintentionally *on* an intention to act nonintentionally, it might be too loose to speak of intending *to* act nonintentionally. The intention might be to *let* oneself act nonintentionally, and in that case the phrase "intending to act nonintentionally" must be shorthand for "intending to let oneself act nonintentionally." I leave out this complication in the text, and continue to speak of intending to act nonintentionally.

poorly thought through, unreliable, less restful than setting a timer, or likely to make my time at the river too long or too short. The belief is directly subject to this kind of evaluation and is usually itself a response to considerations like these. The standing up and beginning to walk, on the other hand, is like a nonintentional pacing, doodling, humming, or ducking. Intellectualism carries no implication that this action requires a normative belief. It says nothing about nonintentional actions at all. Once I do start to walk, and notice what I am doing, I follow through intentionally, acting on my intention to go home when I notice that I already started walking. It is important to distinguish these different objects of explanation: the initial intention, the nonintentional action, and the intentional action. They are distinct, even when temporally close together.

The resolution of at least some Buridan cases can be explained in the same way. Imagine yourself in a Buridan case, in which you do not see how to justify favoring any one option. Like Al-Ghazali's man, you are hungry and can walk over to one of two dates. Having one date is better than none. You believe this, and believe you should take one. You also believe you need some way to do it. No outside intervention is forthcoming, and neither is a reason to take one over the other. It seems that, on the one hand, nothing other than an action of yours can resolve the case; on the other hand, you see nothing on which to base an intention to take either date, and no way to begin the intentional action of taking one. All you have left is action without intention. So you decide to act nonintentionally as a way of getting one of the dates. Your activity, both outward and 'merely' mental, continues without the guidance of intention with respect to which date to choose, usually until you either move closer to one or focus on one in a way that results in its appearing in some way privileged. At this point, of course, the tie is broken. You can see relevant differences between the two dates; one is slightly closer, or you are moving toward one, or you want one more. You can then form the belief that you should take that one. And you can follow through intentionally. This is what you do, as a means to getting one of the dates.

Such a case is structurally similar to my sitting by the river. At the river, I decided to act nonintentionally. I believed in advance that the action would be standing up and starting to walk home, though I did not know when this would be. In taking a date, you decide to act nonintentionally, and believe in advance that the action will in some way privilege one date, though you do not know which one. The first case is not a Buridan case, because I did not believe there was no relevant difference between standing up earlier and standing up later. But it illustrates a strategy that can be used in Buridan cases. The strategy is to first form an intention that responds to the available reasons (for going home soon but not thinking too much, or for getting a date) but un-

derspecifies the action to be taken, and then to form an intention to act nonintentionally, in order to determine the action one will intentionally perform. In both kinds of cases, we have a belief in advance about what it is that we should do. We believe we should begin an action that is, from our perspective, at least as good as any other we could perform. But in order to do that, we let our nonintentional actions 'decide' which one.

To describe nonintentional selection between alternatives, it can be useful to introduce the notion of *picking*. We are sometimes asked to pick a card from a deck, or a cookie from a tray, or a can from a shelf, or a number between 1 and 20. It is less common to be asked to *choose* a card from a deck, or to *decide* on a card. Although these words are used in many ways, the word 'pick' can usefully mark a contrast. When we are asked to pick, we are typically expected not to deliberate. And in agreeing to pick, we agree in part to rely on nonintentional processes. We do not fully understand the nature of those processes. But we normally know we can count on them to make the selection. When we agree to pick a number, we typically allow our nonintentional activity to determine what that number will be.

'Picking' often contrasts with choosing based on a prior evaluation of one alternative as distinctively worthwhile. Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser describe the contrast. As they point out, a single situation, such as buying a hat, can be a 'picking' situation for one person who is indifferent among them, and a 'choosing' situation for another, depending on each person's preferences, expertise, and character. A friend's advice or an advertisement can transform a picking situation into a choosing one or vice versa. And just as there is picking and choosing, there are pickers and choosers. Picking can be more prevalent for those of us who are apathetic, nonchalant, or carefree, and choosing for the pedantic, meticulous, or neurotic. Some of us are unusually indifferent; others treat even minute differences as relevant.[30]

I will occasionally use the word 'pick', in a sense that covers both a purely mental picking of a number, and a reaching for a particular cookie. In resolving some Buridan cases, we can say, we decide to 'pick', in the following sense: we decide to act nonintentionally to determine which alternative we will take.[31]

30. Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing."

31. Here my use of 'pick' differs from Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser's, in two ways. First, rather than treating 'picking' as a central notion throughout, I treat it as calling for further specification in terms of other, more fundamental notions, and offer a conception of the relevant sort of picking. Second, in considering responses to a 'picking' situation, they distinguish "direct" extrication—that is, by picking—from turning the situation into one that is no longer a picking situation. In my usage, the contrast between nonintentionally reaching for a cookie, and nonintentionally moving in a way that leaves one cookie much closer and therefore obviously privileged, becomes irrelevant.

## IV. RECOGNIZABILITY

Is this really recognizable as a way we resolve Buridan cases? The most skeptical version of this question doubts that we can take this strategy at all, or at least with any consistent success. Try not to think about pink elephants. You will usually fail. At best, you will succeed without the ease with which we pick a card or a soup can. Why think we can "turn off" intention with any more success?

A similar doubt can begin with introspection. When we consider the way we resolve Buridan cases, the decision to act nonintentionally can seem to build in too much cognitive structure. When grabbing a soup can off a supermarket shelf, do we really decide to do it nonintentionally, then start to do it, notice ourselves taking one, and intentionally follow through? One wants to say: don't we just take one and buy it? Even if the decision to act nonintentionally is possible, and even if it is effective, it might involve more than we can recognize ourselves as doing in these cases.

In the next three sections, I consider these and other doubts about the solution I described. We can begin by asking whether the decision to act nonintentionally is recognizable as even *one* common strategy for resolving Buridan cases. In Section V, I consider how the strategy allows intellectualism to account for all intentional resolutions of Buridan cases, satisfying the Exhaustiveness Condition. In Section VI, I turn to the rationality of the strategy.

My afternoons by the river are enough to show the possibility of success in the intention to act nonintentionally. What can be done even once cannot be impossible. The afternoons also help to show in what sense we "turn off" intention in such cases. The decision to act nonintentionally is implicitly relative to a particular domain of our activity. In this respect, a decision to act nonintentionally is like a decision to "do nothing." Someone can encounter a friend's relationship crisis, or a surge in stock prices, or a chance to go to the beach, and decide to "do nothing." She will, of course, do many things while she "does nothing," just as I intentionally did many things while I sat on the grass by the river: I stretched, said hi to a passing acquaintance, and planned my next vacation in painstaking detail. Nothing so far has ruled out that it might be possible, through meditation, or absorption in physical activity, or in some other way, to, for a while, act entirely without intention. But whether or not we can do this, the resolution of an ordinary Buridan case does not call for anything so radical. The decision to act nonintentionally in a Buridan case is a decision to act without intentionally pursuing any of the tied alternatives in that particular case. It forms one strand in a rich and ongoing mental life—a decision made relative to the

Buridan case itself. The decision then allows our nonintentional actions, together with our unrelated intentional actions, to break the tie.

The more difficult question about the recognizability of this strategy is not whether the strategy can ever succeed. The question is whether the strategy can succeed easily enough, reliably enough, and in a familiar enough way to be recognizable as one we commonly take. Here, trying not to think about pink elephants offers a helpful *dis*analogy. When you are told not to think about pink elephants, you are set up to fail. The intention not to think about them has a content which, when called to mind explicitly, frustrates the intention. To remember the intention is to fail to carry it out. So although we can succeed in distracting ourselves through indirect means, the attempt is essentially effortful and unreliable—so much so that, as Daniel Wegner puts it, an unwanted thought will often "only go away when we welcome it back."[32] Thought suppression tends to backfire.

When we decide to act nonintentionally in a Buridan case, on the other hand, we are normally set up to succeed. The goal is to break the tie that frustrates deliberation. The attempt leaves our attention directed toward the options we see as most worthy of choice, and we usually have a desire for each of them. The rest of our ongoing activity tends to upset the delicate balance of the Buridan case, while our attention and desire are often pulled to settle on one option and dwell on it. At the same time, we have an enormous wealth of experience with Buridan cases, especially when it comes to the objects of appetites like hunger or thirst. We have picked one cookie out of many, more times than we can count, and resolved many related Buridan cases. We have a well-developed repertoire of habits of nonintentional action for these and related cases, and we can usually just let them take their course. It is no surprise that a decision to do this can be reliably effective.

To see how familiar this decision is, it helps to notice that my afternoons by the river are only one, relatively specific instance of the broader phenomenon. When I decided to only go home upon noticing that I had started walking, what ensued was a bodily movement—a nonintentional standing up and beginning to walk—that formed the beginning of a stretch of movement that I completed intentionally. In Buridan cases, there is a wider range of possibilities. One can begin a movement and complete it intentionally, as Al-Ghazali's man would if he found himself starting to walk toward one date. Or, instead, the deciding action can be a mental one; the man might find himself, guided by causes beyond both his understanding and his interest, thinking longingly about the date on the left. Or, instead, the deciding action can be

32. Daniel M. Wegner, *White Bears and Other Unwanted Thoughts: Suppression, Obsession, and the Psychology of Mental Control* (New York: Guilford, 1989), 180.

apparently unrelated to either date; the man might jump in place, stumble, and find himself farther left than before. There is no need to begin a single action, either outwardly or mentally, that turns out to be the taking of one particular alternative. Once again, all we need is for our activity to break the troubling tie.

In all of these variants, the tiebreakers can be tiny. In an example of Michael Bratman's, "My . . . reasons in favor of taking route 101 to San Francisco may seem on reflection equal in weight to those in favor of route 280. Still I must decide."[33] In deciding to act nonintentionally, success does not depend on finding oneself already on the ramp onto route 101. Such a lapse of decision is dangerous and, partly because we avoid it, unlikely. But Bratman might conclude that his reasons are equal in weight, decide to let his nonintentional actions break the tie, and, after a moment of uncertainty, find his hand moving toward his right turn signal. He might then think: "I guess I'm taking 101"—not because he is forced to take it, but because he now finds it slightly but clearly favored by his movement toward taking it. In the 'mental' variant, instead of his hand, he might find his thoughts wandering toward a more detailed plan of how he will drive if he takes route 101. Even one or two newly thought-out details in one alternative plan can lead him to see that his reasons are no longer equal, since one plan is now more detailed than the other. In the third variant, concerning unrelated action, Bratman might find himself thinking about prime numbers, or the odd appeal of palindromes, or remembering a relative who will soon be 101 years old. His associations of these with route 101 are some of many potential sources of a slight added inclination to take that route. Whether it is a movement, a detail of a plan, or an initially independent train of thought, a tiebreaker can be barely significant and nevertheless effective. It would be surprising to meet someone who did *not* know that her nonintentional activity tends to shift the delicate balance in cases like Al-Ghazali's, or did not make use of this fact.

The decision to act nonintentionally can still seem too cognitively sophisticated to be our standard way of resolving Buridan cases. I think this doubt is correct. As we will see in the next section, a decision to act nonintentionally is not made even in all intentional resolutions of Buridan cases. It is certainly not how we resolve the many Buridan cases in most supermarket aisles. So the strategy does involve much more than usually happens in a Buridan case. It is a common strategy, only when the resolution of the case in one particular way is intentional.[34]

33. Bratman, *Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reason*, 23.

34. There is also no implication here that we have a general capacity to decide to act nonintentionally, exercisable even when we believe we should take one particular alternative. If we believe we should take 101, we can find it difficult to decide to, in the relevant

To see this contrast, imagine the indefinite number of slightly different possible ways of raising your arm. When you raise your arm, there might be many such alternative raisings between which you see no relevant difference. And when we raise an arm, we usually do it without thinking or deciding how to do it at all. But when we do have a more particular intention—to mimic someone's arm raising, or to keep our wrists straight—that intention brings greater cognitive structure to the action. This, not the ordinary raising, is the analogue to the intentional resolution of a Buridan case. When, for example, we get so far as to ask ourselves which soup can to take, we might find no easy way to choose a particular can. It is at this point that we often say: "I just have to pick one." This recognition is, I think, an expression of the need for a nonintentional action, a mere 'picking' in contrast to decision. It is here that I think we can recognize ourselves taking the strategy I described. We decide to 'just pick' and to then 'go with that one'.

## V. EXHAUSTIVENESS

Recognizability does not yet show that a view meets the Exhaustiveness Condition. Even if we sometimes intend to act nonintentionally, does this strategy allow intellectualism to account for *all* intentional resolutions of Buridan cases?

To see how it does, we can first distinguish the Exhaustiveness Condition from three other, more demanding conditions:

1. *No Failure*: Explain why we can resolve all Buridan cases.
2. *All Action*: Explain all resolutions of Buridan cases.
3. *Single Strategy*: Explain how a single strategy can account for every intentional resolution of a Buridan case.

The decision to act nonintentionally cannot explain why we can resolve all Buridan cases, since there is no guarantee in any particular case that the decision will lead to a resolution. Our nonintentional action can fail to break the tie. Indeed, my own strategy at the river could sometimes lead a person to sit indefinitely. But intellectualism does not need to explain our ability to resolve all Buridan cases. We have no such ability. We sometimes fail. For intellectualism, failure is the easy case,

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sense, simply pick a route. Intellectualism offers a way to explain why. To form an intention to pick, we must, according to intellectualism, believe we should pick. But if we believe we should take 101, it will be at least very hard to form the conflicting belief that we should simply pick a route. More generally, intellectualism rules out the possibility of intentional picking in situations in which we do not believe we should pick. In one way, then, intellectualism must insist that—and can explain why—the strategy of acting nonintentionally is sometimes unavailable.

leaving no intentional action to account for. It is success in resolution that presents a theoretical problem.

Similarly, an intention to act nonintentionally cannot explain nonintentional resolutions of Buridan cases, in which no intention is formed at all. But again, it does not need to. Intellectualism, as I described it, applies only to intentional resolutions.

Finally, there are many kinds of intentional resolution of a Buridan case. A particular way of using attention, such as looking around until our eyes look directly at one date, might occur to us, without any other apparently equally good strategy coming to mind. Or instead, we can decide to look more closely until we find a relevant difference, then fail, and find ourselves closer to one date. Or instead, our explicit strategy might be to flip a coin, and we might take that strategy without noticing that we have to resolve a distinct Buridan case in matching dates to coin outcomes. We often resolve Buridan cases intentionally, without deciding to act nonintentionally. But to account for our intentional resolutions of Buridan cases, intellectualism does not need to show that we always resolve them in one particular way. Intellectualism does not need to meet the No Failure, All Action, or Single Strategy conditions.

Instead, intellectualism must leave no problematic counterexample unaddressed: no case in which we form an intention without being able to form a normative belief. This was the initial power of Buridan cases. Their resolutions seem to be compelling examples in which there is no basis for a normative belief, and yet success in forming an intention and acting intentionally. As I put it earlier: if the donkey and the man could act only as reason commands, it seems they would starve; they in fact would not starve; so they must be able to act other than as reason commands. Buridan cases seem to be cases of deliberative failure, in which an inability to see a single privileged alternative forces us to select one without believing it is what we ought to do.

If "select" means "intend," we are never forced in this way. It is not true that, if the donkey and the man could act only as reason commands, they would starve. The intention to act nonintentionally offers a way to resolve Buridan cases through normative belief. Sometimes, the route to the normative belief can run through an entirely different explicit strategy, such as turning in place or flipping a coin. But even when we have no such strategy in place, and none comes to mind, we can turn to nonintentional action, believing that this is what we should do.

Here, deciding to act nonintentionally is not simply one recognizable strategy among others. When we see no way to resolve a Buridan case, there is a kind of deliberative pressure to decide to act nonintentionally. Faced with two identical dates, you cannot pursue a resolution except through some action of yours. But if you are truly stuck—if you are deliberating, and deliberation is at a standstill—you see no way

to form an intention that will resolve the case. You see no way to form an intention; but to resolve the case, you will have to act. If you combine these two thoughts, you will have one: to resolve the case, you will have to act without intention. Once you see this, of course, you can intend to do just that. The decision to act nonintentionally is thus a natural last resort; seeing that we see no way to intentionally resolve a Buridan case itself leads us to turn to nonintentional action. There is still no guarantee of success, but there is a deliberative route to a promising and familiar strategy. The strategy is available, and in one way deliberatively favored, in every intentionally resolved Buridan case. In this way, intellectualism is left with no intentionally resolved Buridan cases in which there is clearly no way to form a normative belief.[35]

To say this is not yet to *explain* the process of intentional resolution. How do we manage to take our own intentions out of the picture and get ourselves to act nonintentionally? How does the nonintentional action itself happen? The view I describe can seem to point to an obscure process without telling us how it works.

These questions again help to pinpoint the kind of "account" intellectualism needs to give. How we act nonintentionally, and how we succeed in an intention to act nonintentionally, are interesting and important questions in their own right. But they are questions for intellectualism and other theories more generally, and not for intellectualism's response to Buridan cases. The question here is how our intentions can require normative beliefs, given that normative beliefs privilege one alternative in a way that seems impossible in Buridan cases. The answer is that it is not impossible. The needed explanation is unobvious, but it is neither a general conception of nonintentional action, nor a conception of the effects of intending to act nonintentionally. The explanation is that, when deciding what to do in a Buridan case, we can decide to act nonintentionally; that when deliberation is otherwise at a standstill, this is how we must resolve a Buridan case; and that we ourselves normally understand this. We see that we 'just have to pick', and that is what we do.

Still, even aside from concerns about explanation, intellectualism can seem not to capture what it is like to intentionally resolve a Buridan case. An appeal to the decision to act nonintentionally can seem in-

35. Note that, unlike randomization, this deliberative route does not give rise to a problematic regress. Someone can face a choice between deciding to act nonintentionally and deciding to turn in place, and not see a relevant difference between these. But if she is unable to form an intention with respect to them, she will normally be led to act nonintentionally in picking a metastrategy. Unlike a coin toss, this strategy does not itself require her to resolve a further Buridan case. She herself might, in a pathological case, regress indefinitely, but in that case there is no new problem for intellectualism, and no theoretical view can help her.

consistent with our experience, rather than simply not explanatory. This might leave a remaining doubt about intellectualism's ability to offer an exhaustive treatment of Buridan cases.

One version of this doubt is an application of the Single Strategy condition. As we saw, there are many other possible strategies, which we can take without conflicting with intellectualism. Since we do often intentionally resolve Buridan cases in other ways, there is no need for the decision to act nonintentionally to capture all of our experience of these cases.

Another version of the doubt is an application of the All Action condition. We can seem to resolve Buridan cases much more simply, without any strategy. But this might be true, simply because many resolutions of Buridan cases are not intentional at all. Supermarket aisles again offer many examples.

It can also seem that we do not need a strategy, even in intentional resolution. Can we not just form an intention to take the date on the left? But here, one must ask what "just forming" amounts to. That the process is quick or easy does not show that it is not a process of allowing oneself to act nonintentionally. Since "just" forming an intention is still forming an intention, there must be more to say about how the intention is formed. A decision to act nonintentionally offers one route to its formation. But it is not the only route. And, of course, intellectualism does not insist that we use a strategy, in the sense of a method or policy, of arriving at our intention. It insists only that, if we intend to take the left date, we believe we ought to take it—that, whatever "just" forming an intention amounts to, it also results in a normative belief.

Most fundamentally, this can itself seem false. 'Just' forming an intention can mean precisely: forming it without any corresponding normative belief. Can we not do that?

At this point, the doubt has become a general doubt about intellectualism. It no longer says that intellectualism would, absurdly, condemn Al-Ghazali's man to starvation. A man who could only do what reason commanded could find himself commanded to act without intention, and then find himself eating a delicious dessert. At this point, the apparent independent force of Buridan cases has retreated to a question-begging insistence that we can intend without normative belief. If this insistence is right, it is not shown to be so by Buridan cases.

In Buridan cases, there seemed to be an easy route to intention, with no discernible way to form a normative belief. The decision to act nonintentionally offers a discernible way: one we can recognize, and one which even frustrated deliberation suggests to us. That way is open in all Buridan cases, including the ones in which we do not take some other strategy instead. It leaves no cases that reduce intellectualism to absurdity, as Buridan's Ass seemed to.

In the next section, I consider whether the route is, in fact, a rational one.

## VI. RATIONALITY

We have already begun to see why it is justifiable to decide to act nonintentionally. Although Bratman sees Buridan cases as a central challenge to views like intellectualism, he offers a source of support for intellectualism in this respect. As he puts it: "My . . . reasons in favor of taking route 101 to San Francisco may seem on reflection equal in weight to those in favor of route 280. Still I must decide."[36] Why must he decide? Because he wants to get to San Francisco. This justification is pressing; in Bratman's words, "He really must settle the issue and get on with his life."[37] And it applies before he reaches the fork in the road. Even before we take one route, we often need a plan. We "have limited resources for use in attending to problems, deliberating about options, determining likely consequences, performing relevant calculations, and so on."[38] Buridan cases themselves give us reason to form such plans. "The need for decision in the face of equidesirability, when tied to our needs for coordination, provides independent pressure for being a planning agent."[39] We want to achieve the larger goals that give rise to our Buridan cases, and, given our limited resources and the need to coordinate with other plans and other people, we often need to decide on an alternative in advance. So we have good reason to seek *some* intentional resolution of Buridan cases.

Instrumental reasoning offers the next piece of justification. When we are otherwise stuck in a case that we intend to resolve, nonintentional action is an effective way to go about reaching a resolution. So it is rational to intend to act nonintentionally, as a means to resolving the Buridan case. Once one alternative appears privileged, of course, justification proceeds as usual, whether the tiebreaking nonintentional action is outward, 'merely' mental, or apparently unrelated.

At this point another suspicion might arise. Intending to act nonintentionally is simply intending to let some part, range, or aspect of one's activity continue without intention. But if no other intention is available, it seems one's activity will continue without intention, whether one intends it to or not. So one might wonder: what is the justification for intending it?

There are several. First, a person might not see that she can act nonintentionally to resolve a Buridan case. She might then intend *not* to

36. Bratman, *Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reason*, 23.
37. Bratman, "A Desire of One's Own," 148.
38. Bratman, *Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reason*, 10.
39. Ibid., 11–12.

let her activity continue without intention. This can frustrate her intention to take one of the alternative actions in the Buridan case. That acting nonintentionally is a way to succeed in resolving a Buridan case is a justification for intending it, not a sign that the intention is superfluous. In other words, it is not true that one's activity will continue without intention whether one intends it to or not. One might, in some cases, keep oneself 'stuck' or paralyzed.

Second, though we often find it easy to nonintentionally select an alternative in a Buridan case, proceeding without intention can in some cases be difficult. If we are tempted to keep looking for reasons for another intention, intending to act nonintentionally can help us resist the temptation to deliberate.

Third, and relatedly, intending to act nonintentionally can lead us to take further means to influence our own nonintentional action. If we intend to nonintentionally select a date to eat, we might also intentionally think about how much we like dates, if we know this tends to speed up the nonintentional selection. For all of these reasons, the intention to act nonintentionally is far from superfluous.

The justification I have given here is more complex than the one a person herself will usually have to give in a Buridan case. But it is a way of spelling out the justification implicit in the person's own thought, if she has one, about why she decides to act nonintentionally. The justification is already implicit when someone thinks: "Well, it doesn't matter which one. And I have to do something. So I guess I just have to pick one." Of course, to form the intention to act nonintentionally, we do not have to have an explicit thought about why we must. Al-Ghazali's man can simply think: "I should just pick one and eat it. Mmmm . . . okay, this one." He needs no theoretical grasp of, or further justifying thought about, what happens in his mind when he thinks: "Okay, this one." But if I am right, then, *if* he is deliberating, he might have a thought like: "I should just pick one and eat it." That would be a rational thought to have, and to act on.

## VII. THE DESIDERATA AND THE INITIAL RESPONSES

The possibility of deciding to act nonintentionally offers a way to account for intention and intentional action in Buridan cases that meets all of the desiderata described in Section II.*E*. It allows that there are genuine Buridan cases, and that we can form intentions and act intentionally when faced with them (desiderata 1 and 2). It describes an activity that allows us to do this (desideratum 3). The activity that resolves the Buridan case falls short of intention formation without normative belief (desideratum 4), because it is a combination of normative beliefs with a nonintentional process that itself involves no intention formation

at all. The activity is, I argued in Section IV, recognizable as a way we commonly form intentions in Buridan cases (desideratum 5). As I argued in Section V, the strategy allows intellectualism to meet the Exhaustiveness Condition (desideratum 6). And as I argued in Section VI, there is no implication that intention and action in Buridan cases must be irrational (desideratum 7), since the intention of taking one of the preferred alternatives, the intention to take a particular one, and the actual taking of it can all be given a principled justification.

The decision to act nonintentionally also helps to explain the appeal of all four initial responses considered in Section II. It is natural to deny the phenomenon (response 1), since we can normally expect not to run into insoluble Buridan cases. Living beings move, look around, explore their world, do one thing while hesitating about another, let their thoughts wander across various alternatives, and otherwise engage in activity that will at some point break such a symmetry. We can normally rely on ourselves to do this. Beings like us might not be guaranteed to find a difference between equally good options, but we are usually guaranteed to create one. Though this does not show that there are no genuine Buridan cases to be resolved, it explains some of the appeal of that idea.[40]

40. There is still the possibility that, due to some contingent obstacle, a living being might be unable to pursue an available solution. There might be pathological cases, or intelligent nonhumans, who are unable to decide to act nonintentionally and follow through intentionally, or unable to recognize that they can do this. They can have an impairment in reasoning, or an intense localized anxiety, or an obsession with reversing any initiated action to return to the equilibrium of the Buridan case. These failures do not threaten intellectualism, since they leave no problematic intention or intentional action to explain. For intellectualism, paralysis is the easy case; the difficulty is in explaining success. And since, when we have the intuition that no Buridan case is insoluble, we tend to ignore the possibility of such special cases, we can normally leave them out in accounting for the intuition. This is why I do not pay much attention to the possibility of real paralysis when considering Buridan cases in the text.

Still, it is worth noting that radically different cases of nonhuman intelligence raise other problems. For example, my solution might not easily apply to a divine will. An omniscient, omnipotent God might not have anything like an animal nature that can act nonintentionally, and whose result he would not know in advance. Here a different kind of response might be called for. One difference might be that God does not have future-directed intentions, or, in general, volitional attitudes whose execution must be put off until later. If temporal concepts apply to his will at all, God might always be able to act immediately and effortlessly.

Can God be in Buridan cases, and can he resolve them? On this divine variant, see Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing," 774 n. 19, and Strickland, "God's Problem of Multiple Choice." The topic is a large one, connected to problems about divine freedom more generally. Some might find it to be beyond our understanding, or, instead, to show the incoherence of the notion of an omniscient, omnipotent God. But I am inclined to the simpler view that God, the angels, and many other divine beings have the capacity to act nonintentionally, without having an animal nature. How they do it might be, like divine causation in general, beyond our understanding. But there is so far no obstacle to thinking that, if divine beings do form intentions in Buridan cases, they can do it through nonintentional action.

On the other hand, intellectualism can also say why there seems to be something to the insistence that Al-Ghazali's man would starve (response 2). Buridan cases frustrate deliberation. When deliberating about them, we normally see no way to directly resolve one by forming an intention to take one of the candidate options. We avoid paralysis only by taking a different kind of option from any of the alternatives we seemed to be faced with. Faced with a Buridan case, we can find that intentional resolution cannot proceed on its own, without recourse to nonintentional action. As earlier philosophers might have put it, the rational will must rely on the animal will to achieve its purpose.

There is thus an important grain of truth in the appeal to randomization (response 3). In intentional resolutions of Buridan cases, a person normally delegates her selection to a process that is, from her point of view, entirely arbitrary. She takes a kind of external or dissociated perspective on her own activity, using it as a means of arbitrary selection. As Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser put it: "We are in a sense transformed into a chance device."[41] But the dissociation is limited. In reaching for a can, or standing up by the river, I do not just wait for the reaching or standing to happen. I do it myself. I am not entirely transformed into a chance device, since the device is my own action.[42] So unlike the appeal to randomization, the decision to act nonintentionally also offers a way to do justice to Al-Ghazali's view that the will has "a quality the nature of which is to differentiate between two similar things." When we decide to act nonintentionally, it is our own activity that breaks the paralyzing tie, though not directly by forming an intention.

We can also begin to see why it is natural to think about attention in the context of Buridan cases (response 4). Though I have not offered a general conception of nonintentional action, attention is naturally seen as playing a key role in nonintentional action at least much of the time, though not always in one particular way. And attention comes close to offering the mental but nonintentional 'randomizing device' that nonintentional action makes available to us.

Bratman wrote that if we think of intention as involving a strong evaluative endorsement, then "we have our Buridan problem. It seems that I can just decide on which bookstore to go to, while continuing to see each option as equally desirable."[43] I have tried to explain why this is not true, partly by distinguishing different objects of explanation: in this case, the intention to go to a bookstore, the intention to act nonin-

41. Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing," 773.

42. The phrase "transformed into a chance device" is misleadingly passive in a second way, suggesting that it is someone or something other than ourselves which effects the 'transformation'.

43. Bratman, "Davidson's Theory of Intention," 220.

tentionally and go to whichever one my action prompts me to select, the nonintentional action that privileges a particular bookstore, the intention to go to that one, and the intentional action of going to it. I can continue to believe that, before I decided, it would have been just as desirable to go to a different bookstore. But I cannot believe it would be just as desirable to go to a different bookstore now—to, for example, change my mind and walk or direct my plans in a different direction. As I reach for one soup can and put it into my cart, I can believe that another would have been just as good, but not that continuing with this one is no more desirable than putting it back and taking a different one. What I believe I ought to do is, throughout, what I intend to do: pick a can and buy it, or pick a bookstore and go to the bookstore I picked.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The problem faced by someone in a Buridan case can be put this way: "These are equally good. What do I do?" This is a genuine practical problem, by which even a human being can, at least temporarily, find herself stumped or paralyzed. The case also presents a theoretical problem. The theoretical problem can be put this way: "We form intentions and act intentionally in such cases. How do we do it?" This is a call for explanation that is especially pressing for particular theories, on which we can only intend or act intentionally when we believe a single alternative to be what we ought to do. The existence of Buridan cases is a problem for acting beings; the resolution of these cases is a problem for theoretical views of intention and intentional action.

The solution I offered to the practical problem is: just pick one. That is, do what you do when you pick a number, or a card, or a cookie. Let yourself go on nonintentionally until one stands out, and go with that one. This is not the only possible solution, but I think it is a good one. It does not take much time or effort; it appeals to capacities we already have; and it can be unobvious, and helpful to someone who is gripped by the problem.

The solution to the theoretical problem is: we usually just pick one. That is, we let ourselves go on nonintentionally until one alternative stands out, and we intentionally pursue that one. We do this for good reason. It is better to pick than to remain stuck: better to take one can, or card, or cookie, than none at all. And there is no theoretically damaging tie here. What we intend to do, and what we do intentionally, is what we believe we ought to do: pick a date, and eat it.