

Literature and insights Editorial

1828

A third way?

In my last editorial, I mentioned a dedication that a friend added to a book she gave me. Her beautiful cursive script featured in the front of Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. I wanted to raise this separately here because, though it was a long time ago, her words have stuck. She wrote, "When faced with two choices, take the third."

That advice encourages being aware, of seeking possibilities beyond the most obvious ones, especially when they present as a false dilemma, an unnecessarily limited choice. The notion of a third option has been recognised for ages – you can tell because its Latin term, *tertium quid*, is still used in some circles.

We are often encouraged to be more creative in our approaches to study, work, and more generally; both to see opportunities for thinking about a situation less narrowly and to follow through with solutions and methods of execution that challenge orthodoxy. There is little value in doing so, however, if it does not really rise above novelty for its own sake. For instance, there is a temptation to fall in with practices that are new and prominent and, even better, promoted by popular figures in their field – there is always a succession of these. Still, there is nothing harmful in knowing what ideas are being raised. Call it research, if you will, but be critical.

You have a duty in many situations to question a dichotomy, even if it is essentially to keep your wonderfully tuned brain agile. It is not enough, however, to take a third option simply because it is not one of the first two on offer. As Eliezer Yudkowsky (2007) said, one should strive for the optimal choice rather than merely a defensible one. That optimal choice does not have to lie on the line between the first two, as long as it is justifiable.

But how do you get there? Given just two choices, Yudkowsky (2007) argued for spending a full and properly timed 5 min with "eyes closed, brainstorming wild and creative options, trying to think of a better alternative". Such focus sounds beneficial but how does one actually undertake brainstorming? That is something covered extensively elsewhere, with mind mapping and word-storming being popular methods among many. Whichever one you try, I recommend briefly recording all ideas for possible further study and not dwelling on an idea for long when it first comes to mind (reserve being critical).

At this point, I want to return to the "third option" idea itself. Let us say that you have decided to reject a two-choice offer and you have performed some intensive creative thinking. You have come up with potential alternatives. There are two further steps: choosing the third option and, making it happen.

It might surprise you to know that comparing different pathways requires applying criteria that also face a writer who is considering how a character will react to a false



dilemma by taking a different path. Such a response is only plausible in a novel or TV show if the character has enough “time, resources and knowledge” available to execute it properly (TV Tropes). Yes, it is more complex than this because we have to think about character motivation in stories too – what drives their behaviour, what do they hope for and fear? Motivation is an issue in a commercial enterprise as well, along with considerations of public image and the goodwill, but those three basic needs persist. The relevance to commerce is echoed in such commentaries as longstanding Business Blogger and Radio Broadcaster Dave Kirby (2015) acknowledging the importance of “third way” thinking in one of his commentaries.

If you undertake brainstorming and your subsequent involvement is in planning rather than executing what comes next, maybe gathering information and expert advice for others to act upon, those three requirements stand. And the third option may mean working in stages rather than one tidy move, the first being a transition or bridging one that you need before moving forward. Being open to this possibility is also a hallmark of a flexible thinker.

When writing inside my copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, my friend was trying to tell me not to be hasty or too limited in my own thinking on a particular issue. Hindsight showed her to be right. I should have taken her advice and considered the kind of process that I mention above.

Basil Tucker’s piece in this issue is a light-hearted one that takes a well-known, humorous approach to rejection letters and adds something new. I think readers will like it very much, especially if they have not seen the older versions, and more so if they have been through the mill of submission and rejection a few times. In its way, this piece suggests a reaction that sits very comfortably with “the third way”.

Your own creative contributions can be submitted via ScholarOne (see below), and your e-mail correspondence is always welcome at: steve.evans@flinders.edu.au.

Steve Evans
Literary Editor

References

- Kirby, D. (2015), “The third option”, *I Simple Thing*, Nashville, available at: www.1simplethingonline.com/the-third-option/
- TV Tropes, “Take a third option”, TV Tropes, available at: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TakeAThirdOption>
- Yudkowsky, E. (2007), “The third alternative”, Less Wrong, 3 May, available at: www.lesswrong.com/posts/erGipesbbzdG5zYb/the-third-alternative

Further reading

- Pirsig, R.M. (1974), *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, William Morrow and Company, New York, NY.