Consider yourself in the following three scenarios: 1) you are out hiking and encounter a bear, 2) the check engine light of your car suddenly flicks on, 3) you need to decide whether to stay at a stable but tedious job or pursue something riskier but more fulfilling. How do you respond in each of these situations? Neglecting the minutiae of bear encounter protocols, I'd guess in the first scenario the natural choice is to move away from the potential predator. In the second, assuming you are not a car maintenance aficionado yourself, you probably get the vehicle inspected and worked on by a mechanic. In the third scenario, however, it is not immediately clear how to proceed. Decisions like this pop up over and over again in life: choosing where to go to college, where to live, who to be friends with, what hobbies to pursue, whether to marry, what to prioritize in life (family, work, recreation, etc.). Most people are not thinking about existential questions like this on a daily basis, and rightfully so. These are uncomfortable and disorienting questions to confront. That being said, clear "crossroads" moments in life, such as deciding where to go to college or whether to get married, are relatively rare, and it might be tempting to forego serious thought about decisions like this, opting to deal with them on a case-by-case basis. But the reality is that we make "miniature" existential decisions daily–deciding to stay home and work rather than unwinding with friends is an example of a decision to prioritize career prospects over recreation, at least on that particular evening. If you have been curious to establish some firm basis on which to ground important decisions of this sort, you, like me, may have found such criteria strangely absent. We will explore why decisions of the bear- and car-variety are easy to make while decisions of the sort typified by the job scenario are often difficult. It should not be surprising that some decisions are more challenging than others, but we will see that the really tough decisions all have one characteristic in common–deep uncertainty. Though understanding this does very little to reduce this uncertainty, it may help appreciate that the anxiety and disorientation kicked up by difficult existential decisions are apparently natural responses to a lack of strong cultural and religious norms telling us what we ought to do.

The first task is to carefully establish why the first two decisions are easy and the third is not. In the case of the bear encounter, instinct screams at us to get away from an animal that could be dangerous. The decision is easy because it happens at a level below consciousness–evolution has equipped humans, as potential prey animals, with a hard-wired response to flee predators. Decisions of instinct are so easy that they don't even register as decisions most of the time. Not touching hot stoves or approaching dangerous animals, throwing away rotten food, staying away from edges of cliffs, even responding tenderly to a friend's suffering…these actions are so natural that we hardly even think of them as decisions. Our unconscious appeals to the authority of instinct help us make countless decisions on a daily basis.

On the other hand, evolution has not equipped brains with instincts regarding car maintenance. The ability to understand and usefully intervene in a car's complicated mechanical and electrical systems is not the result not of instinct but of training and experience. Thus, the decision to take

the faulty vehicle to a mechanic is easy because the mechanic has know-how that you lack. These decisions are based on an appeal to expertise. In situations where instinct falls short, it is natural to investigate whether the knowledge of experts can help guide the decision-making process. If it can, the decision you need to make about something unfamiliar (what do I do to get my car to start again?) can be replaced by that of the expert. We most frequently rely on experts in the form of mechanics, doctors, lawyers, plumbers, electricians, books, etc. If your car breaks down, you break a bone, you need legal advice, or an outlet stops working, the obvious thing to do is get help from the relevant expert. It is simply not possible for an individual to acquire and store the knowledge necessary to understand in detail the inner workings of cars, bodies, legal systems, and infrastructure, let alone the myriad other technical systems we interface with. In relying on experts for help with decision-making, we as a society externalize and distribute our knowledge. To the extent that experts live up to their promise of informing good decisions about complicated problems, we are generally content to rely on them.

What do the decisions based on instinct and expertise have in common that make them so simple? My sense is that situations in which instinct or expertise are operative are uniquely amenable to trustworthy models. What I mean by this is the following: instinct and expertise work when 1) desired outcomes of the decision are well-defined and 2) the phenomenon about which the decision is made is relatively predictable. A model can be formulated when you know what you want to pay attention to (whether the car starts, whether you survive the bear encounter) and when the phenomenon of interest is regular enough to permit predictions (cars with spark plug issues don't run, being far away from bears reduces the likelihood of attack). The term "model" is being used here in a very general sense as an intellectual tool to make predictions relevant to your goals.

In the case of the bear, our brains encode the fact that being further away from predators is desirable from the standpoint of survival. The goal of survival is well-defined, and the finding that distance from predators correlates strongly with safety is very robust. As such, it has been possible to evolutionarily develop simple models about how to respond in many potential survival situations. The predictions of these models arise as instincts, which compel us to either approach or avoid. Similarly, the goal of normal functioning is well-defined for the car example, and the phenomenon under study (the mechanics of the vehicle) is complicated, but ultimately predictable. Unlike evolutionary models which are encoded at the level of instinct and thus unconscious, a model of a car is conscious and can exist externally in the form of blueprints and/or computer models. Cognitive models acquired through training and experience along with these external models make it possible to investigate what the system-wide consequences of a faulty part would be. This is the kind of understanding which helps make a decision about the solution to the problem of a broken-down car.

Not all, perhaps not even most, decisions we make in life involve phenomena which lend themselves to trustworthy models. When deciding whether to change jobs, not only is it impossible to *predict* a future in which you decide to settle for stability over greater fulfillment, it may not even be possible to *judge* that future. For a phenomenon as complex as your feelings about a new job, the state of the future is impossible to predict. Worse yet, your goals and values in the present may or may not align with your goals and values in the future, so even if you were to know what a decision of this sort would entail, it would not be clear how to assess it. This allows us to appreciate the importance of both predictability and well-defined goals, and because hard decisions involve both uncertainty about future states and how to assess them, they are deeply uncertain.

How then do we make decisions in situations with no recourse to the models of instinct or expertise? If the relevant future states cannot be predicted in the context of challenging decisions, on what basis do we make choices about jobs, education, time management, and relationships? In the presence of strong religious and cultural convictions, many of these decisions are made for us. Norms held to be inviolable by a community dictate expectations for relationships, career, family, and so on. Strong norms address the problem of uncertainty in making challenging decisions. When the future cannot be predicted, it suffices to appeal to norms as an authoritative basis on which to make decisions. Like the case of instinct, decisions made by norms can be so "easy" that they cease to even register as decisions–for example, that marriage happens at a certain stage of life, that men pursue one line of work and women pursue another…for adherents to these norms, these appear not to be decisions but simple facts of life. This certainty–which to many of us now seems artificial, and often harmful–is a boon from the perspective of the anxiety that challenging decisions in life kick up. Many of us in the West have immense freedom of self-determination, with very few norms focusing thought about important life decisions. Thus, the original question can be refined slightly–in the absence of instinct, expertise, or strong religious/cultural norms, on what basis do we make decisions?

One approach available for decisions in the context of deep uncertainty is that we appeal to the wisdom of stories. I use the word story to mean a written or spoken account of decision-making creatures (human, animal, or otherwise) that showcases the consequences of action in a particular situation. For example, the story of the Garden of Eden showcases the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God. The story of Candide showcases the implausibility of a young boy's optimism in the face of a cruel and irrational world, along with a prescription for how to cope with this world. Even simple sayings like "the grass is always greener on the other side" can act as stories in this sense of the word, because implicit in this saying showcases how disappointment is the consequence of a naive pursuit of novelty. The only trick required to take advantage of the wisdom of stories is to find a way to "map" your personal situation onto the logical structure of a story. In other words, the way to unlock the wisdom of stories is through analogy. In deciding whether to change jobs, we can appeal to the "grass is always greener" by

an equation of the sort “current grass = current job” and “other side = new job,” from which we conclude that a pursuit of novelty will lead to disappointment. In this case, the mapping is quite obvious, but this is not always so. In mapping more complex stories like Genesis or Candide onto everyday life situations, there may be much more ambiguity and artistry. From the standpoint of informing decision-making, the hallmark of a good story is that it provides useful wisdom, and that it can be flexibly applied to many different scenarios.

When extracting wisdom from stories through the construction of analogy, we are really making a coarse prediction about the relevant aspects of the future. The grass is always greener suggests that chasing novelty will not lead to increased happiness (the prediction is relevant in the sense that it doesn’t furnish any information about details of the future which are not of interest, such as the weather on a particular day). Thus, stories function as very general models in the same way as instinct and expertise do. Interpreting stories in this way is an appeal to the wisdom and experience of authors. This gives us a clue to how consequential but uncertain decisions in life are made: we reference the stories of novels, movies, myths, religion, and the anecdotes of friends, see if they map onto our present dilemma, and if so, use the consequences of the character’s choices to inform our own decision-making.

There is a problem with this approach, however. When there is no overarching set of religious or cultural stories as canonical reference points for decision-making, the number of potentially informative stories is intractably large. And in this setting, stories often contradict each other. “The grass is always greener on the other side” but “you miss every shot you don’t take.” With the story of Candide, Voltaire tells us to resign ourselves to “tend our own garden,” but we are often encouraged to follow passion and never settle. Genesis warns of the pitfalls of knowledge acquisition and going against the natural order of things, yet our culture champions the power of science to demystify and transform the world. “Birds of a feather flock together” but “opposites attract.” “Slow and steady wins the race” but “haste makes waste.” Anyone looking for a consistent normative world picture from stories will be sorely disappointed.

So if instinct and expertise are limited in scope, many of us lack norms to structure our lives around, and the wisdom of stories, though helpful, is often inconsistent, the question remains: how do we make decisions? I think the answer is simply that it is hard to make decisions about important things. The anxiety flowing from these decisions is an inevitable consequence of the deep uncertainty which characterizes these choices, and the impossibility of honestly making that uncertainty disappear. Though parts of us long for the kind of certainty that totalizing accounts of the world provide (cults do have a certain appeal, after all), we should not adopt such intellectually irresponsible beliefs. The world is frequently complex to the point of being unpredictable, and our preferences which inform judgments are ever-shifting. Though stories can act as models to help structure our decisions, they are by no means a panacea for the ills of uncertainty. My sense is that there is a certain irreducible difficulty to making decisions of the

job sort–we can rarely say that we know for sure what the right choice is, *or what the "right choice" even means*.

Next time you are confronted by a choice with no simple answer–whether it's about changing jobs, pursuing higher education, or moving to a new state–try using the models that the stories of religion, film, literature, and your friends' experiences suggest. When you can relate your situation to the circumstances of these stories, what do they tell you the consequences of your choice might be? Unfortunately, when these stories are flexibly applied to different situations, they are also quite insensitive to context. The "grass" might "always be greener" in the context of deciding to pursue a second PhD, but not for getting out of a tumultuous relationship. Thus, the flexibility of the coarse models of the world that stories provide also detracts from their credibility. So if the wisdom of stories is insufficient to make your choice, though you may be stuck with a certain anxiety, you might take solace in realizing that you are not alone in finding a solid foundation on which to make decisions strangely absent. Bearing the burden of this uncertainty is the price that we must pay for liberation from narrow and constraining narratives of what is and what ought to be. The best we can do is attempt to live life in such a way that this freedom is worth the price.

Postscript: I think I have a better solution to the problem of hard decisions now than I did at the time of writing this. I do think there is value in accepting that anxiety is a natural and probably inevitable response to the deep uncertainty that many decisions confront us with. But surely there is more to say than this. I think the corny notion of "authenticity" is relevant here–I haven't read other people's thoughts on this, but my intuition is that authenticity is all about migrating authority from the group to the individual. Religious and cultural norms exist at the level of the group, and as discussed, greatly guide and constrain decision-making. It is comparatively easy to make decisions about marriage (for example) when there is the external authority of norms to appeal to. For many of us in the West, the authority of the group has been dissolved, and I think authenticity repositions that authority inside the individual. The claim is that we each have some internal compass that guides and constrains our desires, but one which now points in the direction of genuine personal well-being. The problem is that the internal compass is hidden from us, and it slowly needs to surface over time. I think the process of surfacing the internal authority of authenticity (an unfortunate word, in my opinion) is trial-and-error. We try things out, see how they feel, and respond accordingly. Over time, one's path becomes more clear, and decisions become less daunting. If you really believe in the internal compass idea, choice might be a less appropriate concept than respecting some sort of inborn truth.