

TOWARDS A FAIRER SHARE OF DISHWASHING

One of my college house-mates, Greg, refused to divide anything by lot. He objected that this procedure discriminates against the unlucky people.

Steadfast randomizers replied that 'unlucky' fails to select a natural class of people. The fact that someone is Indian today is a good reason to believe he will be Indian tomorrow. But being unlucky today provides no grounds for predicting being unlucky tomorrow.

I began to see less of my house-mates as I began to see more of my future wife. She and I moved to a cheap flat. We agreed to transcend gender based division of labor.

This made dishwashing a delicate issue. We tried team dishwashing. But two people cannot wash much quicker than one. We tried rotating the chore. But that raised suspicions of "insensitive dish-dirtying" on one's days off. Dismissing Greg's reservations, we changed to a policy of determining the night's dishwasher by flipping a coin after dinner.

At first, our chancy arrangement created an exciting casino-night atmosphere. But then I lost five times in a row. I kept thinking about the coin in the opening scene of Tom Stoppard's play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. It lands heads on 179 consecutive tosses.

For a while I had the consoling thought that the law of averages would ensure that everything would even out in the long run. But then I realized this was an instance of the gambler's fallacy. If a coin lands heads on five consecutive tosses, devotees of the gambler's fallacy bet on tails. They think that the law of averages works by compensation. But the law of averages actually works by brute force. A lop-sided run of five heads disturbs the ratio of heads to tails over the short run. But the five toss streak has steadily less impact on the 1:1 ratio over the long run. This does not mean the five head surplus disappears; it is merely dwarfed into statistical insignificance by the growing number of coin tosses.

Luck has no memory. The law of averages does not try to make up for past imbalances. Bottom line: My five night's worth of dishes were a dead loss! Just processes do not guarantee just outcomes.

Here is a dishwashing scheme that does guarantee a just outcome because it does work by compensation. Instead of flipping a coin, choose from a deck of cards. If the card is red, my wife washes. If the card is black, I wash. Since the card does not return to the deck, the washer has a lower chance of being selected on the next round. And both parties are guaranteed to wash an equal number of times. Cards are fairer than coins. Coins provide a fair process but fail to ensure a fair result.

The belief that just processes ensure just results is important to political philosophers who reject the principle that the end justifies the means. For instance, in Anarchy, State, and Utopia, Robert Nozick uses the principle to defend the unfettered accumulation of wealth by capitalists. As long as each small transaction is fair, then the cumulative redistribution of wealth is fair i.e. the transfer of money from the many poor to the few rich.

Perhaps Nozick would try to smooth troubled waters with the observation that people do tend to acquiesce to the results of processes they perceive to be fair. Agreed, but there are other explanations. For the sake of domestic tranquility, I might agree to abide by the outcome of some process -- regardless of whether it is fair. But then it is my consent that obliges me to accept the outcome, not the justice of the procedure.

The means do not justify the end.