



Red Ball, Black Ball

There is a stretch of beach from Starr Gate to St. Anne's in Blackpool with fabulous vistas of sky and sea. You could be in Hawaii or Florida or Casablanca – if it were not for dog walkers. This is a nation of dog lovers, and in return, dogs love people, providing they get fed and watered and are treated with respect. You can tell that dogs love their owners because they consistently do daft things for them, like chasing after balls hefted long distances away. The animals would seemingly run through fire and brimstone to retrieve these balls so that master or mistress can repeat the process interminably, bringing their pets the purest happiness.

The dogs never tire. I watch them chasing like lunatics, proud to retrieve and return their coloured balls. I do wonder what goes on inside a dog's mind to give such pleasure, but I fail. Perhaps it's because I can't love as well as a dog nor think as simply. Normally, the throwing and retrieving is straightforward, but I recently witnessed an interesting variation where the owner threw two balls, one red, one black. The little dog, some kind of terrier, chased after them diligently, but was then completely unable to bring either of them back. It saw the black one, nudged it, then remembered the red one. It switched to the red one, nudged it, then remembered the black one. I thought the poor thing would have a nervous breakdown. It switched from one to the other every few seconds, unable to return either of them to its master. If it took one, it would have to leave the other, and if it took the other, it would have to leave the first one.

For all I know, the dog is still there now, dashing from red ball to black ball in a delirium of indecision, but I had to keep moving. I had a destination and a choice had to make. The philosophical principles underlying my own human decision-making processes were clearly different from the dog's. Its life was very much simpler and so should be happier, but in this case, it was tortured by mental paralysis. It was trapped in an eternal see-saw of impossible choices, red ball or black ball. In this case, my own choice was straightforward, keep moving to reach St. Anne's or watch a silly dog waste its life dodging backwards and forwards till the end of time.

But human problems are rarely so simple. I look back on choices that have baffled me, and although we are told never to regret, I have a sneaky suspicion that better decisions could have been reached with better outcomes. These aren't Sliding Doors moments where the end result is similar, they are crossroad decisions that affect future timelines drastically. One never knows for sure because, probably, you only get one crack of the whip, but choosing educational paths, friendships, intimacies and many more momentary options – these alter everything.

It could be that the 'many worlds' theory of universes allows every timeline to be fulfilled, infinite decisions infinitely followed. This is comforting in one way, though it would be fascinating to see how I am doing in at least half a dozen other universes. Whatever the decisions we make, we make them. The worst thing is to be buzzing back and forth, never moving ahead, nudging the red ball and the black ball but completely unable to return either, one's life frozen into a state of permanent and absolute indecision.