

## **BAS: BURIDEN'S ASS METHOD**

This mythical ass was placed at exactly the mid-point between two exactly equal bundles of hay. The ass starved to death because at no instant could it decide which bundle of hay to approach. The balance was so exactly equal that the ass was immobilized. This poor ass was much used by philosophers in their endless discussions about freewill when such discussions were fashionable.

In terms of decisions the point made by the ass is an important one. When the alternatives are all equally attractive it should be the easiest decision ever, because whichever choice is made will be agreeable. It would only be a matter of tossing a coin and being happy with the result (dice method application). Why then are such decisions so very difficult - as with a young lady trying to decide which of two eligible bachelors she should wed? The answer must be that the difficulty lies in bringing ourselves to **GIVE UP** an attractive alternative. In other words, the problem with the ass was his reluctance to turn his back on either lovely bundle of hay. Once we know we are going to have something then its attraction fades but the anguish of giving up something else grows.

The Buriden's ass method tackles this problem directly. The decision maker does his very best to 'knock' or make unattractive each alternative in turn. If he succeeds then there is no pain in giving them up and the best decision emerges.

Suppose a magic jinni appeared and offered you a to-be-granted wish. There was to be the following choice:

1. To be very wise.
2. To be very rich.
3. To be very beautiful.
4. To be a talented artist.

The knocking could take the following form:

- 1 To be very wise: you might find everyone else foolish; you might be more aware of the misery of the world.
- 2 To be very rich: you would never know who your friends were; you might become jealous of others who were richer; you would have many worries.
- 3 To be very beautiful: you would worry about losing your beauty; you would attract unsavoury characters; you would become spoiled.
- 4 To be a talented artist: very frustrating if nobody recognized your talent; there would always be new horizons; talent can be a burden.

Different approach to 'knocking' way out is to use '**WHAT IF...?**' type changes are made in the circumstances to see at what point an alternative suddenly stops being attractive. Suppose you had decided to go to Marbella for a holiday and then generated the following what ifs:

- What if it rained every day?
- What if you did not meet a soul?
- What if Marbella is unfashionable this year?

When you hit on a 'what if that makes the choice unattractive then you have isolated the real reason behind making that particular choice. In the above example if a degree of 'unfashionableness' made the choice of Marbella lose its appeal, then obviously the feeling of being in fashion is part of the decision process - in which case one might choose a place more fashionable than Marbella.

A husband and wife both have excellent jobs and the children are grown up. The husband is then offered a job he has always wanted in a town two hundred miles away. At the moment it does not seem likely that the wife will be able to find a suitable job in the new place. There are the following alternatives (for the sake of the exercise, because in practice one would generate many more):

- 1 Turn down the offer.
- 2 Accept the offer and meet at weekends.
- 3 Wife gives up job and moves.
- 4 Accept it and then resign later if necessary.

We then try the following 'what ifs':

- What if the job is not as attractive as it seems?
- What if whilst separated either party meets someone else?
- What if either party falls ill?
- What if it had been the wife who had the job offer?
- What if a better job in the same place was possible for either?
- What if the wife did find a job in the new place?

The process is really a focusing one:

- Is the job offer really as attractive as it seems?
- Is any job the most important part of life?

Should the wife make the decision?

The final choice is still a matter of personal opinion but it has now become easier to give up the alternatives that are not chosen.