

What Motivates an Early Morning Runner?

Kevin Kinghorn

In the spirit of honesty, I have to say at the outset that my wife is the runner in our family. An injury to my knee during college meant that I'd get my future exercise from cycling, not from running. I'd like to be able to tell you that, if not for my knee injury, I'd currently be posting good times along with my wife in such events as the London Marathon (her most recent race). But the truth is that although I was a pretty decent sprinter, I was always mediocre at anything over 200 meters. Besides, if I were to train with my wife, I'd have to join her in getting up before work to run at 6:00 a.m. And that has always struck me as cruel and unusual punishment.

Confessions of a Night Owl

I have a certain kind of curiosity about any runner who gets out of bed to go on a run in the early hours of the morning (I think the description "middle of the night" is more accurate, but never mind). You see, I occasionally formulate a grand plan to wake up early and get my daily exercise in before starting the rest of the day. But I'm somehow never able to follow through with this grand plan for more than a few days.

Here's what typically happens. On about the third or fourth day, I get as far as putting on my workout clothes. Sometimes I even start exercising for a few minutes. But then I make some excuse like: "I feel extra tired this morning. Maybe I have a slight cold coming on, so the prudent thing is probably just to go back to bed. I'll have a good workout tomorrow." But when tomorrow comes, and the alarm clock goes off at 5:30 a.m., my grand plans have lost their momentum. I mutter to myself, "What *was* I thinking?", and I roll over and go back to sleep. My early morning exercise plans never last more than a week.

My wife never seems these days to have any such difficulty going for an early morning run. She made a decision some weeks ago to train every day for an upcoming marathon. And when the alarm clock sounds each day, she's out of bed and into her routine in a flash. She never seems to struggle with a decision about whether she should go running that day. She never seems prone to making lame excuses like: "Maybe I have a slight cold coming on." It's as if her body is on autopilot and she simply does by rote what she's in the habit of doing.

If early morning exercise can be described as a series of struggles for me, and if it can be described as no struggle at all for my wife, then my uncle falls somewhere in between the two of us. He's retired now, but still regularly goes on an early morning run. He's been doing so for decades. Although he does usually meet his mileage goal each week, he no longer runs every day. Some days when he wakes up, he simply says to himself, "I don't feel like going out today." (Hey, he's retired; he's earned the right!) Unlike me, however, he never seems to lose his overall momentum to exercise early in the morning. He still manages to get up and run three or four days a week.

So there seem to me to be three types of early morning runners. First, there are people like me who, when they get up early in the morning, wrestle every step of the way with the temptation to stop what they're doing and go back to bed. Second, there are people like my uncle who wake up and decide whether to go running—but once they make their initial decision, they follow through with it easily and unhesitatingly. Third, there are people like my wife for whom the whole process occurs out of habit and without any real thought that they might actually choose *not* to go running that day.

Philosophically, these three types of runners are interesting because they can help us understand the distinction between *decisions* and *intentional actions*. Philosophers who study human action make use of this distinction in explaining the different sources of our actions. And when we've come to understand this distinction—which we'll explore by looking at our three types of runners—we'll be in a position to describe in some detail the thought processes of the early morning runner.

Group 1: The Constant Struggler

As I've already confessed, I'm a member of our first group of runners, whom I'll call the "constant strugglers." The constant struggler wrestles with a series of decisions every time the alarm clock goes off. Does he get up or hit the snooze button? (Often, this decision ends up being made a number of times in the course of a morning!) Once he's sitting up, does he go ahead and get dressed or does he lie back down? Once he's dressed, does he go out the door or stay at home and read the paper? Once he's out the door and onto the street, does he start running or keep walking? At the end of each street corner (or, for track runners, at the end of each lap), he must wrestle with the decision to stop or keep going. Thus, what is characteristic of this first group of runners, the constant strugglers, is that they must make a whole series of decisions if they are to complete their morning run.

Of course, not *every* move they make will qualify as an actual *decision*. When running, a runner doesn't *decide* to put his left foot here, then his right foot there, and so on. It would be mentally exhausting if we had to concentrate on each step and actually make a decision as to whether our foot should go, for example, *here* or six inches to the right. Instead, what happens is this: We make a decision to run to the next corner, or to run another lap. And our bodies simply "carry out" our intention without much, if any, additional conscious thought. This point becomes quite important as we turn to consider our second kind of runner.

Group 2: The Single Decision Maker

You'll remember my earlier comment that my uncle only makes one initial decision each morning about running that day. Once that decision is made, everything else follows. This kind of scenario really is not that unusual.

Imagine that you're in bed one evening, unable to sleep, and you remember the leftover pizza in the refrigerator. You decide to go downstairs and help yourself to a slice or two—maybe even pour yourself a glass of beer to wash it down. (Even elite athletes have to carbo-load, you tell yourself.) By the time you've sat down at the kitchen table with your food, how many decisions have you made? Probably, the answer will be: one. You don't decide to get out of bed and then, once out of bed, weigh your options about how to get downstairs before *deciding* to head toward the stairs. Once downstairs, you don't map out different floor-plans for getting to the kitchen and then *decide* to walk through the living room, then *decide* to open the fridge, then *decide* to get out the pizza, then *decide* to put it on the plate. All these subsequent "decisions" are really just different aspects of the single decision to get some pizza instead of continuing to lie in bed.

Similarly, runners like my uncle make the single decision to go running. Everything else simply follows and there are no further actual *decisions* made. But what should we call these further actions? After all, when my uncle takes an individual step during his run, it's not as if the raising of his legs is a reflex action (like when a doctor hits your knee with a rubber hammer to

test your reflexes). So how should we characterize these actions that follow from his initial decision?

Philosophers who analyze human actions typically refer to these subsequent steps as “intentional actions.” Our modern understanding of intentional actions owes much to the work of Elizabeth Anscombe (1919–2001). Anscombe emphasized that intentional actions are those actions of ours about which we can give our own reasons as to why we perform them. Thus, an intentional action can be contrasted with things like the reflex action of raising your leg when it’s struck by a doctor’s rubber hammer. To give an explanation of why your leg jumps, Anscombe explained, you would need to include your observation of what the doctor is doing to your leg. You wouldn’t simply be able to give *your* own reasons for initiating this action.

One example of an intentional action is your action of holding this book right now. You might be holding it with your left hand, or with your right hand, or perhaps with both hands. You might be holding the book two feet from your eyes, or six inches from your eyes, or somewhere in between. Are you currently conscious of any *decision* you made to hold the book this way instead of some other way? Probably not. But this action of holding the book in a certain way is still an intentional action. If someone asked you why you’re holding the book as you are, you would be able to explain that the reason is that it’s a comfortable way of positioning the book so your eyes can easily focus on the words of the page. Thus, your intentional actions don’t always have to be actual *decisions*. In everyday life, our intentional actions greatly outnumber the conscious decisions we make.

Let’s return to the case of your decision to eat pizza late at night. In this case you make only one decision: the decision to get some pizza instead of continuing to lie in bed. All the actions that follow from this decision—the actions of walking down the stairs, opening the fridge, and so forth—are not decisions, but are instead *intentional actions*. Similarly, runners like my uncle make the single decision on any given day to go running. Once that decision is made, all the actions that follow from it—the actions of putting on running shoes, going out the front door, and so forth—are intentional actions. But, unlike with our previous group of the constant strugglers, these actions are not instances of actual decisions. Thus, this second group of runners is aptly termed the “single decision makers.”

Group 3: Running by Rote

Let’s move now to our third group of runners, of which my wife is a member. My wife made the decision some weeks ago to get in race shape for an upcoming marathon. The running she now does each morning is done in virtue of this earlier decision. Our third group of runners, then, are those people who have made an earlier decision—such as the decision to get in shape for a race, or to lose weight, or to lead a healthy lifestyle. Running each morning has become a habit and stems from this earlier decision. Members of this third group perform *intentional actions* when they go on their daily run; but they don’t make daily *decisions* to run.

So, our third group of runners is in a similar situation to our previous group, the “single decision makers.” One decision is made, and then everything that subsequently takes place occurs as a natural consequence. The only difference is that, for the third group, the actual decision to run occurs at some point in the past. And because this third group makes no daily decision to run, we might say that their running each day is done by rote.

There’s a side issue worth mentioning at this point. In saying that my wife runs each day “by rote,” I’m not suggesting that she mindlessly trains each morning, oblivious to any benefits from

running other than better fitness for a pending marathon. Runners in the third group enjoy the early morning air on their daily runs. They enjoy communing with nature. They enjoy having accomplished something before most people are even awake. They enjoy jump-starting their day so as to feel vitalized as they begin work.

In view of these facts, it may seem wholly inadequate to describe my wife's early morning run as simply an act of getting in shape for a marathon. In some ways, it seems more natural to describe her run as an act of discipline, or an act of physical accomplishment, or perhaps even an act of communing with nature.

The good news is that we are not forced to describe the third group's early morning runs as *either* an act of communing with nature *or* an act of getting in shape. Rather, we can describe these early morning runs as *both*. Actions often can have multiple descriptions. Philosophers sometimes point to the example of shooting a gun. Should we describe this action as a person squeezing his finger? Or pulling the trigger of a gun? Or firing a bullet? Or shooting a man? Or killing an adversary? Well, the answer is that these are *all* legitimate descriptions of the action in question. A single action can have multiple descriptions.

So for my wife, there is no problem with explaining her daily run as an intentional action that follows automatically from a decision she made sometime in the past to get in shape for a marathon. *Explaining why* her act of running occurs does not prevent us from *describing* this act in any number of legitimate ways.

If the early morning runner really is like my wife, then he will not actually make a daily decision whether to perform an act of discipline that day, or an act of physical accomplishment, or an act of communing with nature. He won't actually be making any daily *decision* whatsoever. Still, his act of running—which, again, will be an intentional action and not an actual decision—can be accurately described as all of these things. And this is because, as we have seen, a single action can have a number of legitimate descriptions.

What's in the Mind of a Runner?

We're now in a position to summarize the thought processes of our three groups of early morning runners. In the first group, the "constant strugglers," options are weighed and decisions are made at every turn. No wonder constant strugglers often abandon their task. There are so many decisions that have to turn out the right way in order for a single run to be completed! The second group, the "single decision makers," don't face the same struggle. But they do face one struggle: the decision either to stay in bed or get up and go running. Happily, once the decision to run is made, there are no more struggles about the run that day. They still must perform a number of *intentional actions* if they are to complete their run; but they need not make any more *decisions*. Best of all is the third group: those who run by rote. None of their intentional actions on a given day of running amount to actual decisions. And without having to weigh options and make decisions, there is no struggle.

How does a person become a member of this third group, if he or she is not there already? The most common way into the third group is by means of habit. The more you perform a difficult action, the more you become naturally inclined to do that action—without hesitation and without struggle. For example, by forcing yourself to tell the truth when it is difficult, you get in the habit of telling the truth. Aristotle (384–322 BC) made this point in remarking that "a state of character results from the repetition of similar activities." He observed, "We become just by

doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.”¹ Adding to Aristotle’s list, we could say that a person becomes a habitual early morning runner by running early in the morning!

If someone lacks the willpower to make consistently disciplined decisions over time until running becomes a natural habit, might there be other ways to become a member of the third group? Well, the answer is that it is at least *possible*. Sometimes an experience will be so emotionally significant for us that it has a dramatic and lasting effect on our motivations. For instance, a teenager who has just taken up smoking, and who then has a parent die from an emphysema attack before his very eyes, may be permanently affected by the experience and never able to bring himself to smoke again. And it is possible that some momentous event might so increase a person’s motivation to run every day that he jumps immediately into our third group of runners. For example, a person might be told by a heart specialist that, unless he takes up daily exercise, he won’t live more than six months. Or, a youngster might be so inspired after watching a dramatic race at the Olympics that he determines there and then to someday become an Olympian himself.

In these cases, a single event may so greatly increase the person’s motivation to run every day that he never subsequently has to wrestle with any real decisions whether to run. Still, although it is *possible* that one’s motivation can be dramatically and permanently changed like this in an instant, surely this is an uncommon occurrence. The impact of even momentous events tends to wear off over time. It is far more likely that, if a person wants to move into the third group of runners, he will need to do so gradually over time by making disciplined running a natural habit.

I used to have hopes of making my early morning routine enough of a habit that I at least joined my uncle in the second group of early morning exercisers. But I know myself too well. Once I lose momentum from sleeping late a time or two, I lose the plot. I think my only chance is to psyche myself up, and then make a momentous decision on the spot that permanently changes my motivation. This will allow me to jump from the first group of constant strugglers right up to the third group. So, today I make a solemn declaration of my decision to join my wife every day for early morning exercise! It’ll just immediately become a habit which I’m never tempted to break! (But wish me luck. My wife—who knows me pretty well—is already snickering as she’s reading this.)

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999), p. 19.