

On Precision  
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In the summer of 2010, LeBron James, the best professional basketball player in the world, was a free agent, as it is called. Up to that point in his career he had played for the Cleveland Cavaliers franchise in the National Basketball Association, as he was forced to do by the way the player allocation system in the league operates. Now he was able to sign a contract with any team in the league. The big sports media story that summer was should James re-sign with the Cavs or go with another team. Teams thought to be in the running other than the Cavs included the New York Knicks, Houston Rockets, and Miami Heat. As the decision date got closer, the scuttlebutt was that James was going to take a multi-year offer from the Heat. I decided it was in James' best interests to stay with the Cavs.

As it turned out, James signed with the Heat, and it is clear now that he made the right choice. Miami got to the NBA championship finals in 2011 and won it all in 2012. That would have never happened in Cleveland given the poor quality of the Cavs' roster. Miami's games are on television constantly, shining the light on James, and he is fawned over as the greatest player on the planet, and maybe ever. You can't get more favorable attention by the media and basketball fans than LeBron James does these days playing for the Miami Heat. Things are going great for LeBron James.

Where, I ask myself, did I go wrong in my thinking in 2010? The answer to that question intrigues me because while it doesn't matter a whit whether I was right or wrong about what sport exhibition company LeBron James ought to work for, answering it might teach me something about good decision-making, as well as help me avoid being wrong about truly important things up the line. Figuring out why I was off in my analyses in the James matter is what this thought it about.

Back to 2010, there were six major reasons I thought LeBron James ought to stay in Cleveland:

1. The Cavs hadn't won an NBA championship in their history and it would mean more to James' reputation if he stuck it out in Cleveland and won a title there than if he were to do it in another city. That he was from the geographical area—Akron—would make him a hometown hero to boot.

2. The basketball public—fans, the media--was going to demonize James big time for deserting Cleveland if he played somewhere else. Especially, the Cleveland fans were going to hate him. He'd become basketball's equivalent of the bad guy in a wrestling match; very bad for his image, plus it is tough living with being trashed every time you turn on the television or read a newspaper, and trying to play the game with people booing and hooting.

3. The Heat—assuming James went there--was star player Dwyane Wade's team. Wade was "the guy" in Miami. If James went there he would be wouldn't be the guy. He'd be a supporting or complementary player to Wade or on a par with Wade; anyway, not the guy as he would continue to be if he stayed with the Cavs. That would lower both James' performance—he'd pass up shots in favor of Wade—and his reputation, he wouldn't be the guy anymore.

4. The details needn't occupy us here, but for various reasons James would make a lower salary in Miami than he would if he re-signed with Cleveland.

5. The sports experts on television and in print and on the Internet that had my attention agreed with me. So it wasn't like I was hanging out there on my own with my rationale supporting James staying with the Cavs.

6. As time went along, my conclusion that James should remain in Cleveland became a pervasive, physically felt, inner reality, a personal or subjective truth. I knew what James should do because I literally felt it, it was part of my being, part of who I was, and that contributed to a heightened identification with my decision and allegiance to it and to a certainty about its correctness. This here-and-now, total, kinesthetic, organic experience of myself with reference to this issue became a reason for my choice apart from externally referenced analyses and conclusions.

All that sounds good; where'd I go wrong? My big problem I've decided is that *I didn't push myself to precision in my thinking*. I went with easy, shallow, superficial reasons for the call I made, stay in Cleveland, LeBron.

Why didn't I press harder toward precision? The factor that stands out is that *there is nothing in my personal and professional existence that encourages, presses, me to be precise about anything*. (Sadly, that includes my work in the university.) Terse, off-the-top, and chatty reactions, commentaries, and opinions, reiteration and endorsement of conventional wisdom, parroting whatever happens to be in the wind at the moment---that's enough, that's fine, move on. Here and there in this site, I've explored what all that is about. Currently, I'm pondering how the ubiquitousness of the social media supports these predilections and plan to write about it. The bottom line: if I had been precise in my thinking, I would have come down on the side of James going to Miami, which would have been the right decision in contrast to the wrong one I made.

With the James decision in particular, reasons 5 and 6 (going along with the experts, and the strong feeling of certainty) were especially influential in keeping me imprecise. I lost sight of two realities related to those two reasons and it cost me in a major way.

The first: *experts are not necessarily right*. I've had a lifelong problem with being taken in by glib, confident-appearing, credentialed--they are somebody special, they are on TV, behind the lectern, they wrote the book, etc.--seemingly-in-the-know types. I'm trying to remind myself to hear these people out, understand what they contend and what's behind their arguments, but to bring a healthy skepticism to it.

And the second reality: *subjective truth is not necessarily objective truth*. A felt sense of certainty should not be equated with insight and wisdom about what's going on in the external world. Feeling dead sure about something often leads to skim-the-surface explorations, seeking out or taking in only what confirms one's position, or closing down considerations altogether.

With the last section as the context, I'll go through the first four reasons for the James decision and note how they were imprecise. As I go along, I'll reiterate them to freshen your mind.

1. The Cavs hadn't won an NBA championship in their history and it would mean more to James' reputation if he stuck it out in Cleveland and won one there than if he were to do it in another city. That he was from the area—Akron—would make him a hometown hero to boot.

What I didn't think enough about were the chances of the Cavs actually winning the championship with James. No player, even as great as James is, can do it alone. Would the ownership and management of the Cavs surround LeBron with enough good players for the team to win in all in the reasonable future? How about Miami? A closer look into that than I gave it would have revealed that the answer is no in Cleveland and yes in Miami. NBA superstars are assessed on the basis of how many championship they win—Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, LeBron James—and the chances of James looking good on this criterion were much better in Miami than Cleveland.

Yes, James would be a big hometown hero in Cleveland if they won. But really, so what? James is a citizen of the world now. His hometown is the planet earth—China, Europe, everywhere. Wherever he wins, in whatever city, he'll be in effect a hometown hero. He is our—humankind's--boy. If he wins in Miami, he'll still be a hometown hero in Akron, Ohio—one of our locals did it, hurray for him and for us.

Even more fundamentally, what team James plays for really doesn't matter all that much. These years, the NBA is a stars league; the focus is on individual players rather than teams. The superstars are bigger than the teams they play for. The teams are by and large a setting for the show they put on and the accomplishments they pile up in the process. When championships are talked about, it is in terms of how many the superstars won, more so than how many the teams won. How many titles did Michael (Jordan), Kobe (Bryant), or LeBron win—things are so focused on individual players, we have a first-name-basis connection to them--not how many did the Bulls, Lakers, and Cleveland win. If James left the Cavs, the media and fan attention would follow him to wherever he went. And that's what has happened: now, all the Heat's games are on national television and Cleveland games are virtually never shown. James didn't need the Cleveland Cavaliers for anything.

2. The basketball public—fans, the media--was going to demonize James big time for deserting Cleveland if he played somewhere else. Especially, the Cleveland fans were going to hate him. He'd become basketball's equivalent of the bad guy in a wrestling match; very bad for his image, plus it is tough living with being trashed every time you turn on the television or read a newspaper, and trying to play the game with people booing and hooting.

For a brief time after going to the Heat this was true, but I didn't think about how long it would last. James and his advisors understood the media: they are about today's news, not yesterday's; they are about how you are doing right now. If James didn't feed the he-abandoned-Cleveland story and just went about his business of playing great basketball, he would quickly revert to the revered superstar. And that's what has happened. Even the Cleveland ownership and fans have gotten off his case, because if they stay in a snit they look like they are whining over past history—"move on" is big in today's lexicon, in sports and everywhere else--plus they hold out the hope that after James' Heat contract expires he will return to the Cavs, so they want to be in his good graces to up the chances that he will do that.

3. The Heat—assuming James went there--was star player Dwyane Wade's team. Wade was "the guy" in Miami. If James went there he would be wouldn't be the guy. He'd be a supporting or complementary player to Wade or on a par with Wade; anyway, not the guy as he would continue to be if he stayed with the Cavs. That would lower both James' performance—he'd pass up shots in favor of Wade—and his reputation, he wouldn't be the guy anymore.

What I failed to take into account is that any team that LeBron went to would become his team. He'd be the guy wherever he went. Wade would become his supporting player, his complement, and so would another big star that signed with the Heat that year, Chris Bosh, and that's what has happened.

4. The details don't need to occupy us here, but for various reasons James would make a lower salary in Miami than he would if he re-signed with Cleveland.

James salary is actually far from the biggest part of his income. For instance, in 2011-2012, of his 53 million dollar a year income (that's right, 53 million), only 13 million of it was from team

salary. The rest was from product endorsements. So while salary is still important, endorsements are what count most, and they are fueled by winning playoff games and championships and being center stage. The big issue around money for James was where he could go to put on the best basketball show and get the most attention and adulation, and thus increase, or at least maintain, his endorsement income. Miami was a lot better for that than Cleveland.

So that's where I went wrong about LeBron James. Of course the big issue, and I'll get to it right after writing this last paragraph, is using what I've come to here in figuring what I'm wrong about now. Where have I accepted easy answers that feel right about things that matter to me—like those connected to work and relationships and living patterns and activities--instead of pushing with all I have to be precise; and how is it costing me; and what would I gain if my thinking, and more importantly, my actions, were grounded in an understanding of the world as it actually is rather than what I think and feel it is. While I'm working with that, I need to keep in mind that I'm part of the world of reality I'm trying to comprehend, and that it helps immensely if I cut through shallow notions of who I am and what I'm about to the truth about me. Know thyself, Robert.