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SCIENCE

Chance, or Human Judgment?

For some kinds of decisions, chance may be better than human judgment. Adoption of the policy of selecting draftees by a random drawing of birth dates has been widely commended as the most democratic method available when the number of men who must be drafted is only a fraction of the number of men available.

If risk should be allocated by lot, perhaps benefit should be also. The Federal City College (the new land-grant college in Washington, D.C.) had many more applicants than could be admitted to its first class. Selection on the basis of grades or test scores was inappropriate, for the institution was intended to be an "open door" community college. A lottery solved the selection problem. In December, the arts and sciences college of the University of Illinois used a lottery to choose its quota of 3350 new students from among 4200 well-qualified applicants for admission in the autumn of 1970. In this case, the 850 losers were less impressed with the democratic fairness of a lottery than were the 3350 winners; public pressure, including pressure from parents of rejected applicants, persuaded the university to reconsider, and to accept all 4200 qualified applicants. The university has, however, announced that, if necessary, it will use random selection for 1971.

There are other selection decisions that could be made by chance. Traditionally, the best medical care has been available to the affluent, and in some places also to the indigent. If excellent medical care is not available to everyone, would not allocation on a random basis be more equitable?

A general principle can be stated: when the number of eligible people exceeds the number who must bear a particular burden or who can receive a particular benefit, the most democratic, equitable, and moral basis for allocation is by chance.

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The use of a lottery to decide who will receive a benefit that cannot be granted to all or who will bear a burden that need not fall on all is a denial of rationality. Under an earlier method of selecting draftees, local draft boards could take into account the particular circumstances of individual men and the particular needs of the country or the communities in which they lived. Errors and biased decisions no doubt occurred, but the system honored the rational judgment of a group of one's fellow citizens, not the luck of the draw.

To choose students by a random process is to deny the ability of the faculty to select those applicants who show greatest promise or who appear most likely to benefit from higher education.

In times of battle or catastrophe, a triage officer selects the ill and wounded who most need, and who are most likely to respond favorably to, prompt medical attention. A physician is surely more competent than a pair of dice to make such decisions and to determine which patients should be given access to limited medical resources.

To use a lottery to allocate risks or benefits is not only a denial of rationality, it is also a denial of man's humanity; each man is reduced to a cipher, distinguished from other ciphers only by the uniqueness of the combination of digits that identify his records in a growing number of office files.

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Should Judgment wear a blindfold, or should she be required to see the persons judged?—DAEL WOLFLE