

MEANING, MORTALITY, AND CHOICE

The Social Psychology of Existential Concerns

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CHOICE, FREEDOM, AND AUTONOMY

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Security is more important than wealth.

—Jacob von Uexkull, *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men*

In his master work, *Suicide* (1897/1951), the great sociologist Emile Durkheim attempted to determine the factors that affected the suicide rate in different European societies. What he found was that the more unconstrained people were—the fewer their ties to family, community, church, or nation—the higher the suicide rate. The more people depended only on themselves to make decisions and articulate rules of conduct, the more vulnerable they were. In short, people seemed to need obligations and constraints to give structure and meaning to their lives. Durkheim coined the term *anomie* to describe the normlessness that characterizes a society of autonomous, freely choosing individuals (see Haidt, 2006, for a discussion of the relevance of Durkheim's ideas to contemporary society). This theme was in many respects echoed years later by Erich Fromm (1941) in *Escape from Freedom*. Though Fromm celebrated human autonomy and rationality and urged resistance to values that were simply derived from authority, he also identified relatedness, rootedness, a need to see oneself as part of a social group, and a need to understand one's place in the world as central ingredients of well-being. Needs such as these led people to "escape from freedom." Similarly, Yalom (1980) discussed the paradoxes and tensions that could bring isolation and meaninglessness as consequences of freedom and responsibility. Both Fromm and Yalom were writing from a

view of the world articulated by Sartre (1943/2001), who saw a kind of radical freedom of choice as the human condition. Though Sartre's arguments were largely ontological, both Fromm's and Yalom's were distinctly psychological.

In this chapter, I attempt to provide support for Durkheim's (1897/1951) observations by examining recent research on the relation between freedom of choice, autonomy, and well-being. To anticipate my conclusion, if Durkheim was correct in his observations of life at the turn of the 20th century, his conclusion is even more correct now.

Western societies are guided by a set of assumptions about well-being that is so deeply embedded in most of us that we do not realize either that we make these assumptions or that there is an alternative. The assumptions can be stated in the form of a rough syllogism:

The more freedom and autonomy people have, the greater their well-being.

The more choice people have, the greater their freedom and autonomy.

Therefore, the more choice people have, the greater their well-being.

It is hard to quarrel—either logically or psychologically—with this syllogism. The moral importance of freedom and autonomy is built into this nation's founding documents, and the psychological importance of freedom and autonomy is now amply documented (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 1975; see also Chapters 12 and 13, this volume). There is also no denying that choice improves the quality of people's lives (see Chapters 14 and 21, this volume). It enables people to control their destinies and to come close to getting exactly what they want out of any situation. Choice is essential to autonomy, which is fundamental to well-being. Healthy people want and need to direct their own lives. And whereas many needs are universal (food, shelter, medical care, social support, education, and so on), much of what people need if they are to flourish is highly individualized. Choice is what enables each person to pursue precisely those objects and activities that best satisfy his or her own preferences within the limits of his or her resources. Any time choice is restricted in some way, there is bound to be someone, somewhere, who is deprived of the opportunity to pursue something of personal value.

As important as the instrumental value of choice may be, choice reflects another value that might be even more important. Freedom to choose has expressive value. Choice is what enables people to tell the world who they are and what they care about. Every choice people make is a testament to their autonomy. Almost every social, moral, or political philosopher in the Western tradition since Plato has placed a premium on such autonomy. It is difficult to imagine a single aspect of collective social life that would be recognizable if this commitment to autonomy were abandoned.

When people have no choice, as Fromm (1941) realized, life is almost unbearable. As the number of available choices increases, as it has in modern

consumer culture, the autonomy, control, and liberation this variety brings is powerful. And because people are free to ignore choice possibilities when they do not want them, increasing the amount of choice people have seems to be what economists call a *Pareto-efficient move*: It will make some people (those who want increased choice) better off, but make no one worse off. Said another way, it seems reasonable to assume that the relation between choice and well-being is monotonic.

In this chapter, I argue that however reasonable the syllogism seems, and however consistent it may seem to be with past psychological research and theory, it is false. The relation between choice and well-being is nonmonotonic (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). There can be too much freedom, too much choice. And when there is, it induces paralysis or, when paralysis is overcome, dissatisfaction even with good choices. I review the empirical evidence that supports this view, almost all of it derived from studies of choice in the domain of goods and services. I then speculate that the same processes that seem to threaten well-being when people are completely free to choose what to buy also threaten well-being when people are completely free to choose how or who to be.

CHOICE OVERLOAD AND PARALYSIS

The first demonstration that too many choices can induce decision paralysis was provided by Iyengar and Lepper (2000). They reported a series of studies that showed how choice can be "demotivating." One study was set in a gourmet food store in which the researchers set up a display featuring a line of exotic, high-quality jams. Customers who came by could taste samples and then were given a coupon for a dollar off if they bought a jar. In one condition of the study, six varieties of the jam were available for tasting. In another, 24 varieties were available. In either case, the entire set of 24 varieties was available for purchase. The large array of jams attracted more people to the table than the small array, though in both cases people tasted about the same number of jams on average. When it came to buying, however, 30% of people exposed to the small array of jams actually bought a jar; only 3% of those exposed to the large array of jams did so.

In a second study, this time in the laboratory, college students were asked to evaluate a variety of gourmet chocolates (six for some participants and 30 for others). The students were then asked which chocolate—based on description and appearance—they would choose for themselves. They then tasted and rated that chocolate. Finally, in a different room, the students were offered a small box of the chocolates in lieu of cash as payment for their participation. The key results of this study were that the students faced with the small array were more satisfied with their tasting than those faced with

the large array. In addition, they were 4 times as likely to choose chocolate rather than cash as compensation for their participation.

Since this initial demonstration, Iyengar, with various collaborators, has provided similar evidence from a wide variety of different domains, many of them far more consequential than jams or chocolates (e.g., Botti & Iyengar, 2004, 2006; Botti, Orfali, & Iyengar, 2009; Fisman et al., 2006; Iyengar & DeVoe, 2003; Iyengar, Jiang, & Huberman, 2004; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999, 2002). For example, adding mutual fund options to a 401(k) menu decreases rate of participation (Iyengar et al., 2004). Participation rate drops 2% for each 10 options, even though, by failing to participate, employees often pass up significant amounts of matching money from their employers. Though there are no doubt limits to the choice overload phenomenon that remain to be determined, and conditions under which it does not seem to hold (Chernev, 2003; Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2009), it now seems clear that under a broad range of circumstances, people find a large number of options paralyzing rather than liberating.

CHOICE OVERLOAD AND SATISFACTION

When people overcome paralysis and choose, it is logical to expect that when the choice set is large, chances improve that people will choose well, simply because large choice sets are more likely to include a person's most desirable option. Though there is evidence that, at least sometimes, large choice sets will increase the chances of nonoptimal decisions (e.g., Hanoch & Rice, 2006; Hanoch, Rice, Cummings, & Wood, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2004; Tanius, Wood, Hanoch, & Rice, 2009), let us assume that large choice sets will, in general, enable people to do better objectively. The question is, how will people feel about how they do; that is, will better objective decisions produce better subjective results? I (Schwartz, 2004; see also Schwartz et al., 2002) have argued that large choice sets actually undermine satisfaction, even with good decisions. And I have identified several psychological processes, each of which reduces satisfaction with decisions and each of which is exacerbated when choice sets are large.

Regret

When a decision yields less than perfect results, people may regret having made the decision, convinced that an alternative would have worked out better. *Postdecision regret*, sometimes referred to as "buyer's remorse," induces second thoughts that rejected alternatives were actually better than the chosen one or that there were better alternatives that were not even explored.

The bitter taste of regret detracts from satisfaction, whether or not the regret is justified. The more options there are, the more easily one can imagine having done better, and thus the greater the likelihood of regret. *Anticipated regret* may contribute to paralysis in the face of a large number of options. If someone asks herself how it would feel to buy this house only to discover a better one next week, she probably will not buy this house. Both types of regret—anticipated and postdecision—will raise the emotional stakes of decisions (Bell, 1982; Loomes & Sugden, 1982). Anticipated regret will make decisions more difficult, and postdecision regret will make them harder to enjoy (see Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Landman, 1993, for thoughtful discussions of the determinants and consequences of regret). Landman (1993) summed it up this way: "Regret may threaten decisions with multiple attractive alternatives more than decisions offering only one or a more limited set of alternatives. . . . Ironically, then, the greater the number of appealing choices, the greater the opportunity for regret" (p. 184).

Missed Opportunities

Related to regret, large choice sets make salient to people the opportunities they are foregoing in making their choice. Missed opportunities subtract from the satisfaction people get from what they actually choose, as confirmed by a study in which people were asked how much they would be willing to pay for subscriptions to popular magazines or to purchase videotapes of popular movies (Brenner, Rottenstreich, & Sood, 1999). Some were asked about individual magazines or videos. Others were asked about these same magazines or videos as part of a group with other magazines or videos. In almost every case, respondents placed a higher value on the magazine or the video when they were evaluating it in isolation than when they were evaluating it as part of a cluster. When magazines were evaluated as part of a group, missed opportunities associated with the other options reduced the value of each of them.

High Expectations

When people evaluate an experience, they are performing one or more of the following comparisons (see Michalos, 1980, 1986):

- comparing the experience with what they hoped it would be,
- comparing the experience with what they expected it to be,
- comparing the experience with other experiences they have had in the recent past, and/or
- comparing the experience with experiences that others have had.

As material and social circumstances improve, standards of comparison go up. As people have contact with items of high quality, they begin to suffer from "the curse of discernment." The lower quality items that used to be perfectly acceptable are no longer good enough. The hedonic zero point keeps rising, and expectations and aspirations rise with it. As a result, the rising quality of experience is met with rising expectations, and people are just running in place. As long as expectations keep pace with realizations, people may live better, but they will not feel better about how they live.

Large choice sets can have similar effects. If there are two or three styles of jeans to choose from, one's expectations about how well a pair of jeans will fit will be modest. The chosen pair may not fit that well, but what can one reasonably expect with such a small choice set? However, if there are dozens of styles to choose from, it seems inevitable that expectations about quality of fit will rise. Large choice sets will indeed enable people to find better fitting jeans than small choice sets, but if expectations have risen along with the size of the choice set, a good fit will bring no more satisfaction, and may bring less, than a mediocre fit.

Self-Blame

One more effect of large choice sets on satisfaction should be discussed. Suppose a person devotes a great deal of time and energy to making a decision, and then, because of some combination of regret, missed opportunities, and high expectations, ends up disappointed with the results. The questions this person might ask are "Why?" "What went wrong?" "Whose fault is it?" What are the likely answers to these questions? When the choice set is small, it seems natural and straightforward to blame the world for disappointing results. "They had only three styles of jeans. What could I do? I did the best I could." However, when the choice set is large, blaming the world is a much less plausible option. "With so many options available, success was out there to be had. I have only myself to blame for a disappointing result." In other words, self-blame for disappointing results becomes more likely as the choice set grows larger. Because large choice sets increase the chances of disappointing results (because of regret, missed opportunities, and raised expectations), self-blame becomes more common.

"FREEDOM," "CHOICE," "AUTONOMY," AND THE "SELF"

As I indicated earlier, virtually all of the empirical evidence on choice overload and its effects comes from contexts in which people are choosing goods. In consumer societies, the importance of contexts such as these should

not be dismissed. Yet, they seem to pale to insignificance when compared with decisions involving core aspects of one's identity and mode of being in the world. "What should I buy?" does not amount to much when compared with "What should I do with my life?" or "Who should I be?" Moreover, it is in connection with these identity-shaping decisions that the benefits of freedom and autonomy (i.e., choice) loom largest. There is little doubt, as I have previously argued (Schwartz, 2000, 2004), that freedom of choice in these self-defining domains has expanded along with freedom of choice in the world of goods. Young people find themselves with relatively unconstrained choices when it comes to where they live, what they study, what kind of work they do, what religion they practice and how they practice it, what kind of intimate relations they will enter into, and what kind of family commitments they will make. People are free to decide matters of identity, of who they will be in the world. They are no longer stuck with identities they inherit from family and community. And having made the decision about who they are, people are also free to change it (see Gilbert & Ebert, 2002, for evidence that reversibility of decisions decreases people's satisfaction with them).

One plausible view of the modern explosion of choice is that although it does produce the negative effects I described earlier in regard to the world of goods, it also produces significant positive effects with respect to the things that really matter. No longer are people "stuck" with the identities and life paths that accidents of birth, or the views of others, have imposed on them (see Chapter 13, this volume, for a discussion of the concept of conditional regard). Self-invention and reinvention are now real options. Occasional paralysis in the cereal aisle of the supermarket is a small price to pay for this kind of liberation. As I say, this is a plausible view. Nonetheless, I think, as Durkheim (1897/1951) foresaw, it is mistaken. In the admittedly speculative discussion that follows, I try to justify this belief.

Philosopher Charles Taylor (1989, 1992a, 1992b) pointed out that over the past 500 years, self-understanding has been moving in a more or less straight line from "outside-in," through participation in larger entities (the divine order, the "great chain of being," nation, community, family, etc.) to "inside-out," with purpose discovered from within each individual, and the notion of "authentic" self-expression as the supreme aspiration. We in the West have seen this evolution as progress, each step enhancing freedom. Like fish that do not know they live in water, we find it hard to imagine thinking about our lives in any other way. But Markus and collaborators (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), in research on East Asian versus Western cultures, has shown that this movement from outside-in to inside-out is not universal: Most East Asians still define themselves in terms of their relations to others (and some of Markus's most recent research suggests that the inside-out view may be limited to the West's educated elite; see Schwartz, Markus, & Snibbe,

2006; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). Further, choice does not have the same significance for East or South Asians as it seems to have for Westerners (Iyengar & DeVoe, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004; Savani, Markus, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2010; see also Markus & Schwartz, 2010). This research does not challenge the notion that within Western culture, more freedom—more inside-out—is better. Durkheim's (1897/1951) work does that. The Iyengar and Lepper (2000) "jam study" and its companions suggest that perhaps more inside-out is not better and that this is not just a matter of cultural preferences. East Asians may know something that Westerners have forgotten.

Consistent with this possibility, there is good evidence from recent research on well-being—again affirming both Durkheim (1897/1951) and Fromm (1941)—that the most significant determinant of our well-being is our network of close relationships with other people (e.g., Diener, 2000; Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Diener & Suh, 2001; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Lane, 2000; Myers, 2000; see also Chapter 16, this volume). The more connected we are, the better off we are. The thing to notice about close relationships, in connection with freedom, choice, and autonomy, is that close relationships generally constrain, they do not liberate. When people have responsibilities for and concerns about other people, they often cannot do many things they might otherwise choose to do. Until now, the thought has been that this constraint is perhaps just a price worth paying for rich social ties. What the choice overload research suggests is that in modern society, with overwhelming choice in every aspect of life, the constraints of close relationships may actually be part of the benefit of those relations rather than being a cost. And like close relationships with others, outside-in definitions of the self provide significant constraints on what is possible, constraints that, in modern Western societies, may be desperately needed (see Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schlenker, 1985, for a discussion of social and cultural constraints on self-definition found at other times and in other cultures).

What is the evidence that modern Westerners are suffering from this lack of constraint? As Durkheim (1897/1951) foresaw, first, there has been a significant rise in the incidence of clinical depression and suicide, both of which are befalling people at younger and younger ages (e.g., Angst, 1995; Eckersley, 2002; Eckersley & Dear, 2002; Klerman et al., 1985; Klerman & Weissman, 1989; Lane, 2000; Myers, 2000; Rosenhan & Seligman, 1995). Second, there is a substantial increase in the rate at which college students are flocking to counseling centers (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Third, there is a palpable unease in the reports of young college graduates, who seem to lack a clear idea of what they are meant to do in their lives (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). Finally, among upper class adolescents, whose family affluence makes anything possible, there are the same levels of drug abuse, anxiety

disorder, and depression as there are in the children of the poor (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). Further, there is reason to believe that whereas the poor take drugs "recreationally," the rich do so to self-medicate (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005).

SINCERITY AND AUTHENTICITY

More than 30 years ago, literary critic Lionel Trilling (1972) made a distinction that I think has greater resonance now than it had when he made it. The distinction is between *sincerity* and *authenticity*, two terms that many of us probably use interchangeably. Sincerity is about meaning what one says. Sincere people are honest—true to the cognitive and emotional content of their beliefs. Authentic people are honest as well, but they are also true to themselves. So not only do authentic people mean what they say but also what they say, and mean, is a deep reflection of who they are. Trilling suggested that the threat of modernity is that "the center will not hold," so that people increasingly have no self to be true to. They settle for sincerity—in themselves and in those close to them—because that is the best they can hope for.

In a world of uncertain, completely chosen, and easily altered selves, the distinction between sincerity and authenticity vanishes because the idea of authenticity is inapplicable. What can it mean to be "authentic" to a self that can turn on a dime? All it can mean is that one means what one says at the moment one says it. Others do not know what to expect from such a malleable self. Indeed, even the possessor of such a self does not know what to expect. "Where do you want to go today?" as the Microsoft ad asks, becomes "Who do you want to be today?"

The problems for self and others of this kind of malleability are, I think, quite significant. Others lose the ability to depend on such a malleable self. There is no assurance that such a person will wake up as the same person who went to sleep. Perhaps more troubling, the self starts to lose a grasp of who it is. In Hochschild's (1983) study of flight attendants, she observed that what competing airlines had to sell at that time was service quality, and what service quality often meant was the service provided by flight attendants. What mattered to that service was not how many drinks, snacks, and pillows attendants brought but rather how much they really "cared" about the passengers' welfare. In other words, what the flight attendants were "selling" was sincerity ("I really want you to be comfortable. I really want you to be able to relax and not be anxious. I'll be here for you if there are any problems"). The performance of their jobs required flight attendants to have training in what Hochschild called *deep acting*. After all, the best

way to feign genuine concern is actually to feel genuine concern (as a famous disc jockey is reported to have said, "The secret to success in this business is sincerity. If you can fake that, you've got it made").

Flight attendants are skilled at deep acting. But what they reported to Hochschild (1983) was that they were experiencing real difficulty distinguishing the emotional attachments they displayed at work from their real emotional attachments to friends and loved ones at home. That is, it became increasingly difficult for flight attendants to discern what they "really felt." The price of all this sincerity was a loss of authenticity.

That was 30 years ago, when selves were not as malleable as they are now. It seems to me quite likely that the flight attendants' problem has become more acute because more people than ever earn a living providing services and because with a malleable, chosen self, people may not be anything other than what they are saying and feeling at the moment. "Who am I?" was never an easy question to answer. It may now be an impossible question to answer.

FREEDOM, CHOICE, AND WELL-BEING: A NONMONOTONIC RELATION

I acknowledged at the beginning of this chapter that freedom, autonomy, and choice are essential to well-being. I then devoted the remainder of the chapter to arguing that there can be too much of a good thing. The question I address now is how choice can be good and bad.

My answer is that choice has independent positive and negative effects. The positive effects—enabling people to get and do what they want and demonstrating to people the control and autonomy they possess—have diminishing marginal utility. Just as the 100th orange one procures provides much less utility than the first, so the 30th entrée on the menu provides less utility than the first. Thus, the curve relating the benefits of choice—material and psychological—to the amount of choice has an ever-decreasing slope as the choice set increases.

What about the negative effects—paralysis, regret, missed opportunities, raised expectations, and self-blame? These effects are minimal when the choice set is small, but as the choice set increases, the effects increase. Unlike the positive effects of choice, the negative effects escalate (see Coombs & Avrunin, 1977, for a rationale for this assumption that "bad things escalate").

How, then, does it feel to have a given amount of choice? The answer, I propose, is the algebraic sum of the positive and negative curves. And what the algebraic sum looks like is that, initially, adding options improves well-being. However, a point is reached when the magnitude of the negative effects is large enough that the curve changes direction. In other words, the relation

between choice and well-being is nonmonotonic (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). It is a significant practical task to locate the "sweet spot," the point along the choice magnitude axis where the benefits outweigh the costs by the largest amount and well-being is highest. This is likely to vary from person to person and from situation to situation.

I think Fromm (1941) recognized the nonmonotonicity of freedom of choice when he wrote,

There is only one possible, productive solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual. . . . However, if the economic, social and political conditions . . . do not offer a basis for the realization of individuality in the sense just mentioned, while at the same time people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom. (pp. 36–37)

When Fromm wrote those words in 1941, the specter of Nazism and fascism was casting a dark shadow on the world. Thus, his worry was about political regimes that deprived people of their essential autonomy. What the modern world teaches us is that this is not the only worry. Too much freedom can lead to insecurity and doubt just as too little freedom can.

CONCLUSION: FREEDOM FROM AND FREEDOM TO

I have tried to argue that whereas there is no denying that "choice is good," it is not always and only good. Further, the relation between choice and freedom is also complex. Though one cannot be free without choice, it is arguable that choice-induced paralysis is a sign of diminished rather than enhanced freedom. The scope and limits of the negative effects of choice remain to be determined. Virtually all of the research to date has involved consumer goods, and usually trivial ones at that. My effort to extend the conclusions of that research to significant nonconsumption domains, including the "choice" of a "self," is an exercise in speculation. Given the amount of dissatisfaction that choice overload seems to cause, and given the large-scale dissatisfaction in the midst of plenty that seems to characterize modern Western societies, the stakes are high. Empirical evidence on choice and well-being in nonmaterial areas of life needs to be collected.

Suppose this evidence is collected and bears out the arguments in this chapter. What then? What would be the implications of such results for public policy? It is difficult to come up with a straightforward answer to this question. First, for those committed to the moral and philosophical view that "freedom" is the highest good and that more choice always means more freedom, evidence that (some) people suffer from choice overload, although perhaps unfortunate, is irrelevant. A little bit of regret is a small price to pay for freedom. Nobody said being free was easy.

Second, and even more challenging, how, where, and by whom is freedom of choice to be restricted? Modern Western political culture is a battle between two ideologies, both of which are incoherent. Liberalism advocates freedom of choice in the domain of lifestyle and culture but regulation and control in the material world of market goods and services. Conservatism advocates unbridled freedom in the market but stringent regulation and control in lifestyle and culture. Conservatives are appalled by the "anything goes" attitude on college campuses, and liberals are appalled by the "casino capitalism" of our speculative financial markets. It is hard to see making much headway on the "choice problem" in an atmosphere as polarized as this one.

Third, and perhaps most challenging, if we were able to find a way to rein in choice, there is no avoiding the fact that some people would suffer—some people's lives would get worse. It is hard to convince someone who has just been deprived of lifestyle options that feel central to life as they want to live it that they have actually been made better off.

Because of these difficulties, it seems to me that the best route to eliminating some of the negative effects of choice overload without also eliminating the liberating effects of choice is not through public policy but through a change in awareness, sensibility, and aspiration on the part of individuals. If people can come to see that sometimes unfettered choice is paralyzing, whereas constrained choice may be liberating, they may seek and embrace constraints in their own lives instead of avoiding them. Helpful here, I think, is a classic distinction made many years ago by philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1958). He distinguished between what he called *negative* and *positive liberty*—freedom from and freedom to. The primary focus of the American embrace of freedom has been "freedom from." The Bill of Rights, the bible of American freedom, is all about freedom from, as it limits the power of the state to intrude in the lives of its citizens. With the meddling of the state kept at bay, "freedom to" is pretty much up to each of us. That is, there are no guarantees that the conditions needed for Americans to live rich, meaningful, and satisfying lives will be present.

What I have tried to suggest in this chapter is that if we pay more attention to "freedom to"—to the conditions that enable the living of good lives,

it may turn out that there can be too much "freedom from." That is, a good life may require constraints, whether imposed by the state, by the family, by the school, or by religious institutions. Greater willingness on the part of psychologists to determine what the constituents of a good life are may embolden them to offer suggestions about which kinds of constraints are needed, and why.

I have suggested elsewhere that perhaps the best model we have for the importance of constraints for freedom comes from our understanding of human language abilities (Schwartz, 2000). The capacity to use language is perhaps the single most liberating characteristic of human beings. It frees people in significant ways from the temporal and material limitations that afflict other organisms. People can say anything about any thing, any time, or any place—even things, times, and places that have never existed. And they can be understood. Thus, language is probably as vivid an embodiment of human freedom and autonomy as anything. What decades of research on language ability has made clear is that the thing that makes the liberating features of language possible is that language is heavily constrained by rules. The reason people can say anything and be understood is that they cannot say anything in any way they want. It is linguistic constraint, in the form of these rules, that makes linguistic freedom possible. What I have suggested in this chapter is that exactly the same thing may be true in connection with the determination of the self. Unconstrained freedom leads to paralysis and becomes a kind of self-defeating tyranny. It is freedom of choice within significant constraints—within "rules" of some sort—that leads to well-being, to optimal functioning. A significant future task for psychology is to identify which constraints on self-determination are the crucial ones.

When Jacob von Uexküll (1938/1954) wrote the sentence with which this chapter began, that "security is more important than wealth," he was trying to understand how organisms of limited cognitive capacity could survive in a complex world. His answer was that although the forest was indeed a complex environment, it was not complex to the squirrel. The squirrel's limited perceptual sensitivities made most of what was happening in the forest invisible and inaudible to it. The squirrel saw and heard what it needed to see and hear. Thus, it survived. Evolution traded the richness of experience ("wealth") that the squirrel might enjoy if it had sensory systems such as human ones for the guarantee ("security") that the squirrel would notice what it had to. According to von Uexküll, this trade was not restricted to squirrels trying to negotiate forests; it was evolution's grand bargain. In largely freeing ourselves from the constraints of evolution, by developing culture and cultivating freedom of choice, we have rejected that bargain. This may turn out to have been a significant mistake.

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