

Handbook of the Uncertain Self

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Be Careful What You Wish For: The Dark Side of Freedom

BARRY SCHWARTZ

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet, and another fig was a brilliant professor . . . and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America . . . and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

(Plath, 1971, pp. 63–64)

The amount of choice Americans face every day has exploded (Schwartz, 2004). This should be good news. American society is guided by a set of assumptions about well-being that is so deeply embedded in most of us that we don't realize either that we make those 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). There is also no denying that choice improves the quality of people's lives. 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 absolutely fundamental to well-being. Healthy people want and need to direct their own lives. Whereas many needs are universal (food, shelter, medical care, social support, education, and so on), much of what we need 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, 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 don't 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 is reasonable to assume that the relation between choice and well-being is monotonic.

In this chapter, I will argue that however reasonable the above syllogism is, and however consistent it is with past psychological research and theory, it is false. The relation between choice and well-being is non-monotonic. There can be too much freedom; too much choice. And when there is, it induces paralysis, or, when paralysis is overcome, dissatisfaction with even good choices. I will review the empirical evidence that supports this view, almost all of it derived from studies of choice in the domain of goods and services. Then I will offer a speculative argument 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, 6 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. The students were then asked which chocolate—based on description and appearance—they would choose for themselves. Then they 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. For one group of students, the initial array of chocolates numbered 6, and for the other, it numbered 30. 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 four 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, Iyengar, Kamenica, & Simonson, 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 pass up often 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), 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 non-optimal decisions (Fisman et al., 2006; Iyengar et al., 2004), 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? Schwartz (2004; see also Schwartz et al., 2002) has argued that large choice sets actually undermine satisfaction, even with good decisions. He has 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. *Post-decision 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 out there that weren't even explored. The bitter taste of regret detracts from satisfaction, whether or not the regret is justified. And 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 won't buy this house. Both types of regret—anticipated and post-decision—will raise the emotional stakes of decisions (Bell, 1982; Loomes & Sugden, 1982). Anticipated regret will make decisions harder to make and post-decision regret will make them harder to enjoy (see Gilovich & Medvec, 1995, and Landman, 1993, for thoughtful discussions of the determinants and consequences of regret). Landman (1993, p. 184) sums it up this way: "[R]egret 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."

Opportunity Costs

Economists point out that the quality of any given option can not be assessed in isolation from its alternatives. One of the "costs" of any option involves passing up the attractive features of different options. This is referred to as an *opportunity cost*. Every choice we

make has opportunity costs associated with it. If we assume that opportunity costs take away from the overall desirability of the most preferred option, and that people will feel the opportunity costs associated with many of the options they reject, each of which has some very attractive feature, then the more alternatives there are from which to choose, the greater the experience of the opportunity costs will be. And the greater the experience of opportunity costs, the less satisfaction people will derive from their chosen alternative.

This form of dissatisfaction was 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 are evaluated as part of a group, opportunity costs associated with the other options reduce 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):

1. Comparing the experience to what they hoped it would be.
2. Comparing the experience to what they expected it to be.
3. Comparing the experience to other experiences they have had in the recent past.
4. Comparing the experience to 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 won't *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 all 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 than a mediocre fit.

Self-Blame

There is one more effect of large choice sets on satisfaction that should be discussed. Suppose one devotes a great deal of time and energy to making a decision, and then, because of some combination of regret, opportunity costs, and high expectations, one ends up disappointed with the results. The questions this person might ask is "why?" "What went wrong? What did I do wrong?" And what is the likely answer to these questions? When the choice set is small, it seems natural and straightforward to blame the world for disappointing results. "They only had 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. And because large choice sets increase the chances of disappointing results (because of regret, opportunity costs, and raised expectations), self-blame becomes a common occurrence.

THE GOALS OF CHOICE: MAXIMIZING AND SATISFICING

When choice overload induces decision paralysis and results in dissatisfaction with objectively good decisions, it can be a problem for anyone. But the problem is greatly magnified for people whose goal in making a decision is to get the "best." Half a century ago, Simon (1955, 1956, 1957) argued that in choice situations individuals will often "satisfice," that is, choose the first option that surpasses some threshold of acceptability, rather than attempt to "maximize" and find the best possible choice. Such a satisficing strategy was thought to make manageable the otherwise overwhelming task of evaluating options in terms of every possible piece of information that could potentially be known about them. Rather than attempt to engage in an exhaustive and ultimately limitless search for perfect information regarding a particular choice, satisficers would simply end their search as soon as an option was found that exceeded some criterion.

Recently, with colleagues, I undertook an investigation to determine whether there are individual differences in the tendency to seek the best, or good enough, in decisions (Schwartz et al., 2002). We designed a survey instrument, the Maximization Scale, and then examined the potential relation between various scores on the scale and a range of psychological correlates, including happiness, depression, optimism, self-esteem, perfectionism, neuroticism, and subjective well-being.

We administered the Maximization Scale to over 1700 participants in the United States and Canada who ranged in age from 16 to 81 and came from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Different subsamples of our respondents also completed a number of other standard personality measures. Among these were the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; $n = 1627$), the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck & Beck, 1972; $n = 1006$), a measure of dispositional optimism (Life Orientation Test; Scheier & Carver, 1985; $n = 182$), a neuroticism scale (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991; $n = 100$), a survey assessing subjective well-being (Satisfaction with Life Scale; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; $n = 100$), a self-esteem measure (Rosenberg, 1965; $n = 266$), and a subscale of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1990, 1991; $n = 220$). Finally, we created a 5-item scale designed to assess a tendency to experience regret, and administered it to all of our participants.

In terms of self-reported happiness, there was a clear tendency for maximizers to report being significantly less happy and optimistic than satisficers. They were also less likely to report high subjective well-being scores and were more likely to be depressed. Maximizers also reported lower self-esteem scores and higher neuroticism scores than satisficers, although the latter relationship did not reach statistical significance in our sample, suggesting discriminant validity between the constructs of maximization and neuroticism. In addition, although we observed mildly significant correlations between maximizing and the related construct of perfectionism, the latter correlated positively with happiness in our sample, suggesting that, unlike maximizing, perfectionist tendencies are not necessarily associated with unhappiness. Finally, those who scored high on the Maximization Scale were also much more likely to report experiencing regret. Indeed, we think that concern

about regret is a major reason why individuals *are* maximizers. The only way to be sure that you won't regret a decision is by making the best possible decision. It would seem that maximization constitutes a recipe for unhappiness, in that those individuals who search for the best possible option are more likely to regret a choice once made.

Thus, maximizers showed themselves to be less happy and more depressed than satisficers. In their quest for the best option, they increased their own unhappiness and regretted their choices more than individuals who reported a willingness to settle for "good enough." For maximizers, "good enough" evidently was not, but, at least in terms of their own psychological well-being, "the best" was far from ideal.

I think the effects of maximizing as a goal interact with the size of the choice set. When the choice set is small and an exhaustive search is easily performed, maximizing as a goal is unlikely to have much of an impact on choice, though it may have an impact on post-choice satisfaction. But when the choice set is large and an exhaustive search is not possible (or, if possible, exhausting), a maximizing orientation will serve as a multiplier of the negative effects of a large choice set, impairing both the ability to choose and satisfaction with the results of one's choices. Maximizers will be more likely than satisficers to worry about regret. They will be more likely to experience mounting opportunity costs because they will scrutinize more options (see Nimrod, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2006; Nimrod, Rawn, & Lehman, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2002, Study 2) and they will be more likely to be victims of unrealistically high expectations. Finally, because maximizers will put the most work into their decisions, they will be more likely to blame themselves for disappointing results.

In support of this last point, our research suggests that maximizers are prime candidates for depression. With group after group of people, varying in age, gender, educational level, geographical location, race, and socio-economic status, we have found a strong positive relation between maximizing and measures of depression. Among people who score highest on our Maximization Scale, scores on the standard measure of depression are in the borderline clinical range. Indeed, in one subsample, of the individuals whose BDI scores met the diagnostic criterion for mild depression, 44% also scored in the top quartile for maximization whereas only 16% scored in the bottom quartile. We found the same relation between maximizing and depression among young adolescents (Gillham, Ward, & Schwartz, unpublished data). I am not suggesting that people will become depressed from buying the wrong pair of jeans, but high expectations and personal attributions for failing to meet them can apply to educational decisions, career decisions, and marital decisions just as they apply to decisions about what jeans to buy (the point of the Plath, 1971, quote that began the chapter). And even the trivial decisions add up. If the experience of disappointment is relentless, if virtually every choice you make fails to live up to expectations and aspirations, and if you consistently take personal responsibility for the disappointments, then the trivial looms larger and larger, and the conclusion that you can't do anything right becomes inevitable, and devastating.

To summarize, the evidence suggests that even though the high standards of maximizers will enable them to do better, objectively, than satisficers, when they make a decision they will feel worse about how they do and they will feel worse about their lives in general. In support of this possibility, we have retrospective self-report evidence that maximizers are less satisfied than satisficers with purchasing decisions (both large and small) in their recent past (Schwartz et al., 2002, Study 2). We have evidence from the field that maximizers are less satisfied than satisficers with ice cream choices when the selections are made from a shop offering more than 200 flavors, but not when selections are made from a shop offering 20 flavors (Nimrod, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2006). We have evidence from the laboratory that maximizers, but not satisficers, will pay to increase the size of their choice set, only to be less satisfied with their ultimate decision (Nimrod, Rawn, & Lehman,

2006). Finally, in a study that tracked several hundred college seniors at a dozen different institutions as they looked for jobs, we have evidence that though maximizers do better than satisficers objectively (getting jobs that pay about 20% higher starting salaries), they feel worse, both about the job search process and about the job they ended up with (Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006).

“FREEDOM,” “CHOICE,” “AUTONOMY,” AND THE “SELF”

As I indicated earlier, virtually all the empirical evidence on choice overload and its effects comes from contexts in which people are choosing goods. In a consumer society like ours, the importance of contexts like 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?,” doesn't 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. And 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 (a fact to which this volume attests). 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 though it does produce the negative effects I have described above in 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. Self invention and reinvention is now a real option, and 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 it is mistaken. In the admittedly speculative discussion that follows, I will try to justify this belief.

Philosopher Charles Taylor (1989, 1992a, 1992b) points out that over the last 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. And like fish who don't 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' most recent research suggests that this “inside-out” view may be limited to the educated elite; see Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Schwartz, Markus, & Snibbe, 2006). 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). This research doesn't challenge

the notion that within *Western* culture, more freedom—more “inside-out”—is better. However, the Iyengar and Lepper (2000) “jam study” and its companions suggest that perhaps more “inside-out” isn’t better, that it isn’t all just a matter of cultural preferences. East Asians may know something that Westerners have forgotten.

Consistent with this possibility, there is good evidence that the most significant determinant of our well-being is our network of close relations to other people (e.g., Diener, 2000; Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Diener, & Suh, 2001; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Lane, 2000; Myers, 2000). The more connected we are, the better off we are. The thing to notice about close relations, in connection with freedom, choice, and autonomy, is that close relations constrain, they don’t liberate. When people have responsibilities and concerns about other people, they can’t just do anything they want. 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 relations with others may actually be part of the *benefit* of those relations rather than being a cost. And like close relations to 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, and Schlenker, 1985, for a discussion of social and cultural constraints on self-definition found at other times and in other cultures). Related to this suggestion about the potential importance of constraints, consider the arguments by Carroll (Chapter 15) about the importance of “preparedness” to well-being. He makes a convincing case for a pervasive need to be ready to respond to an uncertain future. The assumption that modern Westerners may make is that by being maximally flexible they can be prepared for anything. What I am speculating is that to be “prepared for anything” is to be prepared for nothing.

What is the evidence that modern Westerners are suffering from this lack of constraint? 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). And finally, in 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). It is this collective uncertainty, and worry about missed opportunities, that is so eloquently captured by Plath (1971) in the passage with which this chapter began.

SINCERITY AND AUTHENTICITY

More than 30 years ago, literary critic Lionel Trilling (1972) made a distinction that 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 also honest, but they are true to *themselves*. So not only do authentic people mean what they say, but what they say and mean is a deep reflection of who they are. Trilling suggests 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 it's 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 very 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 don't know what to expect from such a malleable self. Indeed, even the possessor of such a self doesn't know what to expect. “Where do you want to go today?,” as Microsoft asks, becomes “Who do you want to be today?”

The problems to self and others of this kind of malleability are, I think, quite significant. Others lose the ability to depend on such a malleable self (making it harder for them to be “prepared for anything”—see Carroll, Chapter 15). There is no assurance that such a person will wake up as the same person who went to sleep. But perhaps more troubling, the self starts to lose a grasp of who it is. In Hochschild's (1983) study of flight attendants, she observes 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 if there are any problems”). The performance of their jobs required flight attendants to have training in what Hochschild calls “deep acting.” After all, the best way to feign genuine concern is actually to feel genuine concern (as a famous disk jockey is reported once to have said, “the secret to success in this business is sincerity. If you can fake that, you've got it made”).

And flight attendants became very skilled at deep acting. But what they reported to Hochschild 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 only become more acute, both 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.

Consider the implications of this trend for the important idea discussed in this volume by Briñol, DeMarree, and Petty (Chapter 2; see also Petty & Briñol, 2008; Petty, Briñol, & Tormala, 2002). They demonstrate the significance of confidence—self-validation—to persuasion. But it is hard to *be* confident if the self who wakes up is different from the self who went to bed. This seems to me to be especially true for the important subset of persuasion that is self-persuasion. We often have to convince ourselves of the rightness of a belief or a course of action. This is a challenge if the self that is doing the convincing is different from the self that is trying to be convinced. It seems at least plausible that the development of confidence, and thus self-validation, depends upon a certain continuity of self that may be increasingly difficult to find in modern society. This may result in some resistance to influence, not because people are self-assured, but because there is no self to be assured.

FROM “YOU ARE WHAT YOU DO” TO “YOU ARE WHAT YOU OWN”

The modern explosion of choice has another consequence for the uncertain self that is worth discussing. Imagine buying a pair of jeans 30 years ago. The options were relatively sparse, and because the options were sparse your choice of jeans could not be much of a reflection of who you were. There just wasn't enough variety for jean choice to capture your uniqueness. The same was true of virtually every aspect of consumer culture: enough variety to satisfy diverse tastes, but not enough for consumer choices to be self-defining.

In the modern world, the set of possibilities is so large that it has become plausible for people to think that what they buy *does* reflect who they are. And if “wearables” don't quite do the job, they can get an assist from body art. Brooks (2006) has recently pointed out that between 2003 and 2005 the percentage of Americans between ages 18–50 with tattoos grew from 15% to 25%. Among people aged 18–29, 36% had tattoos. There are several possible consequences of this exaltation of consumer goods to the status of self-definition. First, it raises the stakes of even trivial decisions, perhaps increasing the likelihood of paralysis. If jeans are just jeans, then choosing—even choosing poorly—has little consequence. But if jeans tell the world something significant about the person inside them, then mistakes matter. Second, it enables a shift in the focus of self-definition from what one does to what one owns, thus feeding into a materialism that is by all accounts already excessive among Americans. Kasser (2002) has shown that well-being is not well served by materialism. He reviews a substantial body of evidence that indicates that the more materialistic people are, the less satisfied they are with their lives. And Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) have shown that people get more satisfaction, in general, out of activities than out of ownership. So any social influence that shifts one's focus from doing to owning is likely to decrease life satisfaction. “Self as owner,” rather than “self as doer,” made possible by the explosion of consumer choice is thus likely a recipe for unhappiness, even when people make good choices.

FREEDOM, CHOICE, AND WELFARE: A NON-MONOTONIC RELATION

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

My answer to this question—theoretical, not empirical—is depicted schematically in Figures 4.1–4.3. The y-axis in each figure depicts subjective state and the x-axis depicts number of choices. This could mean either number of options in a specific domain (e.g., styles of jeans) or number of options across multiple domains (e.g., clothes, electronics, investments, jobs, romantic relations, etc.). It is unknown, as an empirical matter, whether choice overload only operates within a domain or extends across domains, though I suspect the latter (and Vohs, Baumeister, Twenge, Schmeichel, & Tice, 2008, offer some empirical support for this possibility).

Figure 4.1 captures the positive relation between choice and well-being. With no choice, life is essentially infinitely bad. As choices increase, welfare increases, but the relation is not linear; there are diminishing marginal benefits to added options. A point is reached at which the added options add little.

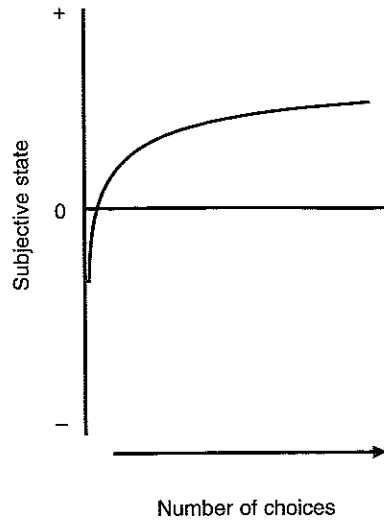


FIGURE 4.1 Diminishing marginal benefits of increased options. This figure presents an idealized, theoretical relation between the number of options available (x-axis) and satisfaction (y-axis). As presented in the figure, no choice is infinitely bad, but as options increase, the marginal benefits associated with each new option decrease.

Figure 4.2 features a second curve on the graph that is meant to capture all the negative effects of choice discussed in this chapter. When there are few options, there are no negative effects, but as options increase, negative effects appear, and as the choice set grows larger, the negative effects escalate. Thus, though there is diminishing marginal utility to added options, there is increasing marginal disutility to added options (see Coombs & Avrunin, 1977, for a rationale for drawing the curve in this way). The point

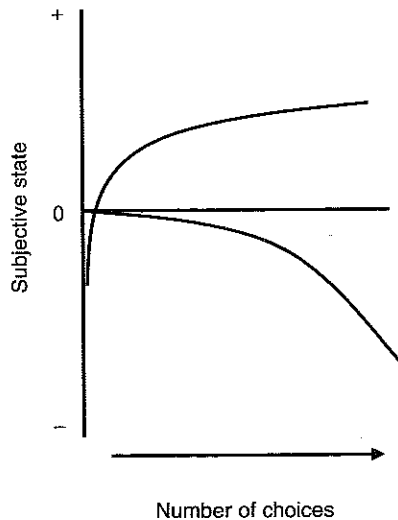


FIGURE 4.2 Increasing marginal costs of increased options. This figure adds to Figure 4.1 an idealized, theoretical relation between number of options (x-axis) and satisfaction (y-axis). As presented in the figure, when options are relatively few, there are no costs associated with having them, but as options increase, costs (regret, missed opportunities, raised expectations) increase in an escalating fashion (after Coombs & Avrunin, 1977).

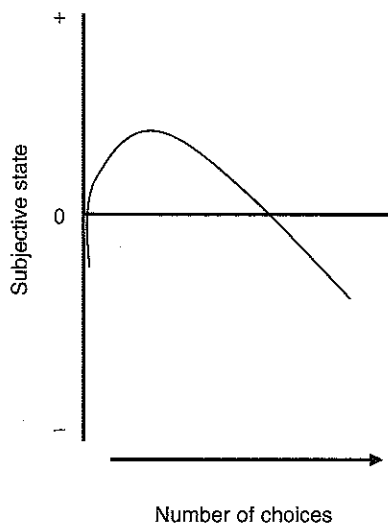


FIGURE 4.3 How choice can be good and bad. This figure presents the algebraic sum of the two curves in Figure 4.2, suggesting that the relation between choice and well-being is non-monotonic.

of drawing two separate curves is that the psychological benefits of choice and the psychological costs are different. Having two curves captures this idea, and the possibility that costs and benefits may be independent.

Finally, Figure 4.3, the algebraic sum of the two curves in Figure 4.2, is intended to show the psychological state that results when the processes in Figure 4.2 are combined. Initially, adding options improves well-being. But a point is reached where the magnitude of the negative effects is large enough that the curve changes direction. Indeed, as I have drawn the curves, a point may be reached where the negative effects of choice so overwhelm the positive effects that the resulting psychological state is worse than neutral. What Figure 4.3 shows is that the relation between choice and well-being is non-monotonic. It is a significant practical task to locate the “sweet spot,” the point along the x-axis where well-being is highest. This is likely to vary from person to person and from situation to situation.

CONCLUSION: FREEDOM FROM AND FREEDOM TO

I have tried to argue that, whereas there is no denying that “choice is good,” it isn’t always and only good. Further, the relation between choice and freedom is also complex. Though one can’t 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 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 non-consumption domains, including the “choice” of a “self,” is an exercise in speculation. But 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 American society, the stakes are high. Empirical evidence on choice and well-being in non-material 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 very difficult to

come up with a straightforward answer to this question. First, for those committed to the moral/philosophical view that “freedom” is the highest good, and that more choice always means more freedom, evidence that (some) people suffer from choice overload is unfortunate, perhaps, but 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 American 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 “gangster capitalism” of our speculative financial markets. It is hard to see much headway being made 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 absolutely 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 while 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). Berlin 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 up 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. So language is probably as vivid an embodiment of human freedom and autonomy as anything. But 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 can’t say *everything*. 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. And a significant future task for psychology is to identify which constraints on self-determination are the crucial ones.

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