The Myth of Choice

Personal Responsibility in a World of Limits

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Introduction

Most of us, most of the time, like to think we are in control of our lives. We are the masters of our own fate. We make our own decisions. In the words of the cheesy poster that hung on my bedroom wall during high school, we “follow our own star.”

Whether politically liberal or conservative, we balk at government limitations on choice and fight those limits with legal arguments about rights and political rhetoric about freedom. Liberals demand access to abortions, want to be able to purchase “medical” marijuana, and don’t appreciate being patted down to get on a plane. Conservatives don’t like requirements to buy health insurance or pay taxes, bristle at limits on gun ownership and school prayer, and decry government regulation of everything from food to the environment. If you’re on the left, you’re called a civil libertarian; if you’re on the right, you may call yourself a Tea Partier. Civil libertarians want the government out of their bedrooms; Tea Partiers want the government out of their wallets.

Liberals and conservatives may disagree about the specifics of what they want to be free to choose, but both sides believe that Choice is Good. And of course they are both correct that freedom and individual decision making need to be protected, applauded, and engendered.

But there are a couple of big problems with this fixation on choice.

The first is that we face a host of choices that we’re unsure should “count” as choices. Examples abound. If your boss gives you a choice between losing your job and sleeping with him, that is not a choice that merits deference. In fact, he’s not allowed to give you that choice at all. But it hasn’t been this way for long. As we know from watching Mad Men,
such understandings were long implicit in the workplace. What if you’re on a bus trip and a policeman stands over you and gives you a choice between getting off and allowing him to search your luggage? Courts have said this is a choice that counts, even though it might not feel like much of a choice. The choice between serving your country in the armed services and being openly gay was seen as valid until recently; now it’s not. A choice to engage in consensual sex gets respect—it counts—unless the choice is to have sex for money, in which case it does not count (at least in most parts of the United States). If a woman “chooses” to wear a burqa because of cultural expectations and religious beliefs, such a choice is usually respected (I saw a woman wearing one recently in my local mall), but not in France, where burqas are now banned in public.

All in all, we might think we like choice, but the question of which choices count and which do not is very, very tricky.

The second big problem with our fixation on choice is that both the civil libertarians and the Tea Partiers assume that if the government is not involved, what remains is a sphere of freedom, choice, and personal responsibility. But the reality is different. In fact, the most significant constraints on choice come not from government but from a host of other forces.

For example, we are constrained by our own biology. You can’t open a newspaper or magazine these days without learning of some new study showing that our behavior is predictable and explainable as a matter of brain science. There is nothing hotter in the world of science, and no area of science that has captured more of the public’s attention, than the study of how our behavior, beliefs, and decisions are profoundly influenced by what goes on in different areas of our brains. It is as if the brain is the new focus of science’s age-long effort to explain seemingly random events in the world around us. The more we know about the brain, the easier it becomes to explain and anticipate the seemingly random behavior of any one of us.
Other constraints are just as profound. For example, the influence of culture is easy to ignore, but cultural norms about everything from gender roles to religious mores are pervasive and powerful. Most of us do not even recognize them, much less resist them. In all honesty, did you choose your gender role, or was it “chosen” for you by the culture you live in? Also consider the role of power and authority when it comes to choice. Most of us, most of the time, respect authority figures and do what they say. We follow orders, even when we shouldn’t and even when they’re not really orders. If a scientist told you to shock someone with an electronic pulse as a part of an experiment, would you do it even after it was clear you were causing pain? We’d like to think we wouldn’t, but good evidence says we probably would, and we might even say that we “had no choice.”

A final example of a pervasive influence is the market. Markets are wonderful in allocating goods and services to the highest bidder, and they might seem to embody the very notion of choice. (Coca-Cola recently ran an ad in my hometown newspaper crowing that it offers “over 650 ways to help you achieve a balanced diet and active lifestyle.”) But depending on markets means that if you have few resources, you have little choice. Also, markets limit choice by making manipulation of our choices profitable. Markets also put price tags on things we don’t want to commodify—left to their own devices, markets sweep up all kinds of things we’d otherwise choose to protect from markets, like babies or kidneys.

So we are faced with a tension. On the one hand, our political and legal rhetoric applauds and deifies choice, autonomy, and personal responsibility. On the other hand, we face profound questions about when choice is real, and about the reality of pervasive constraints on our choices. Once we take into account the influences of biology, culture, authority, and economics, the scope of our choices is much narrower than we have long assumed.

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This book is about that tension. Can our legal system and our political debates become more sophisticated in their understanding of the nature of human choice? Can we craft public policy so that it takes into account these limits on choice? Can we use the insights we are gaining from neuroscience and psychology to create more opportunities for more of us to make more genuine choices more of the time? Can we find ways to build our individual capacity for choice, while creating the situations in which that capacity can be exercised? Can we use the understanding we are gaining about the real limits we face to help us determine when choices should count and to be more understanding when we or others screw up?

It's possible to be aware of the limits on choice and also believe in the importance of autonomy and personal responsibility. Possible, but not easy. This book is intended to help. I hope you choose to read on.