

Choice Is Bad for Us?

It Just Ain't So!

One of the often-unperceived consequences of an expanding welfare state is the gradual atrophy of independent judgment. Judgment is a skill, and, like other skills, it must be exercised to be vigorous and dependable. The fewer opportunities people have to exercise their judgment and the more that others make decisions for them, the weaker this skill becomes. And if the progression continues, it can result in the sorry spectacle of adults unable to make the simplest decisions, nonplussed by options and flummoxed when faced with new situations.

Because the welfare state tends to expand slowly, however, this atrophy is slow. That is why it is rarely perceived. I came to appreciate it only after having lived several months in the United Kingdom, where the welfare state has progressed a few steps further than it has in the United States. The difference this makes in people's abilities to form independent judgments is remarkable. The extent to which Britain's government either makes decisions for people or insulates them from any untoward consequences from having chosen badly has resulted in grown men and women who increasingly find themselves unable to negotiate a business or employment contract, buy a car, decide or even think about health care, provide for their own or their families' well-being, think and plan ahead, weigh short-term against long-term interests, judge their children's educational program, and on and on. If you treat people like children, and structure their world so that they can only act like children, it should be no surprise if

what you get is a population with the judgment and intellectual maturity of, well, children.

And now comes Barry Schwartz, a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College, writing in the *New York Times* (January 22, 2004) that "there is growing evidence" that "for many people, increased choice can lead to a decrease in satisfaction." Why? It "makes people feel worse" when they have to decide among too many kinds of jam or chocolate (Schwartz's examples) because "increased choice creates an enormous burden on people to seek the information needed to make a good decision"; moreover, "plentiful choice increases the chances that people will regret the decisions they make, because of all the bypassed alternatives, many of which might have been better." "Indeed," Schwartz warns, "there may be a point when choice tyrannizes people more than it liberates them." He concludes: "The implication of this news, both for individuals and for government officials, is that sound social policy simply cannot consist of throwing an ever-greater menu of options at the American people."

Of course, the *real* implication of Schwartz's view, which he refrains from stating explicitly, is that some people—perhaps Schwartz himself and his fellow researchers?—will have to limit the options available to all the rest of us, who, lacking judgment and intellectual maturity, just could not handle them all. One wonders how Schwartz and the other experts would escape the paralysis, depression, regret, and ultimate tyranny resulting from having to choose which options to make available to us. One might also wonder about Schwartz's apparent worldview in which the government possesses all the things people might want or use, and therefore must decide whether to offer them or not.

But the real perniciousness of Schwartz's argument is its tendency for self-fulfillment. Slaveowners in the antebellum South some-

times argued that they could not in good conscience free their slaves because the slaves were unable to fend for themselves; they were just too unskilled or unintelligent or uncivilized to figure out what to do, where to go, and how to get what they needed. Thus simply turning them out into the cold threatening world would be to treat them cruelly, not humanely—like abandoning a five-year-old child in the middle of the forest and expecting him to survive on his own.

Imagine your reaction to an eighteenth-century researcher who presents “evidence” that when slaves are given the choice of jam or chocolate, they do not feel liberated but instead are uncertain, confused, even paralyzed. That would prove it, then: “sound social policy simply cannot consist of throwing an ever-greater menu of options at the American [slaves]”; more choice “tyrannizes [slaves] more than it liberates them.” What a transparently self-serving argument that would be! You would reject it summarily.

But that is Schwartz’s argument. Only this time it is not about slaves or children. It is about ostensibly free adults.

Self-Doubting Americans

Perhaps there were American slaves who themselves believed they were unable to manage their own lives, as today there are Americans who think that government experts need to make decisions about which medicines people should take, what constitutes a just employment contract, how to educate children and provide for people’s retirement, and so on. As Schwartz writes, “Who has the time to find the best digital camera, the best cellphone plan, the best 401(k), the best health insurance or the best school for his children?”

Well, I do, for one, as do millions of other people who make decisions about these things daily.

But Schwartz would have us turn over all these decisions to the government experts

instead. Yet in addition to the fact that “individuals are the best judges of their own welfare,” which Schwartz takes to be the only support for individual freedom, it is also true that no one other than the individual in question has the proper incentives to make good decisions. If the government expert makes a bad decision, its consequences are suffered by everyone under his purview—which on Schwartz’s view would be just about everybody.

By contrast, if an individual makes a bad decision, its consequences redound essentially to that individual himself. Even if they also affect his close family or friends, that is a significantly smaller problem than the catastrophe of one distant expert’s making a bad decision for everyone.

This precisely explains what we see: when the freedom to choose and the responsibility for one’s choices are respected, one develops judgment and independence; one becomes an adult. When that freedom and responsibility are taken away, however, judgment atrophies and one becomes dependent, like the slave or child.

In the end, what we want the government to do depends on what kind of people we want. If we want a docile, servile, dependent populace, then we should take Professor Schwartz’s advice and continue extending the welfare state apace. If, on the other hand, we want a free and responsible populace—along with all the diversity, unpredictability, and independence that comes with it—then we should stop the welfare state in its tracks.

It is probably clear that I endorse the latter course, and that I find arguments like Professor Schwartz’s to be contemptible. Freedom is a bracing thing, and it does indeed entail both successes and failures, not to mention hard work. But what in this life that is worth having does not?

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