

Preface

The essential thesis of this book is this: for the majority of us, having *choice*—and having to make *choices*—has become and will continue to be the most important factor that influences both our personal lives and our prevailing culture.

Years ago, I was struck suddenly by the notion that being “modern” means being *able to choose*. Most of us in the developed world, particularly in the United States, have vastly more choice both on a daily basis and with respect to our life paths than did our predecessors just one hundred years ago.

Often, people say that the United States of America is an *idea*. Central to this idea is, of course, freedom. Freedom to *choose*. People first came to America to exercise the right to choose their religion, and others followed hoping to shape a new and more prosperous life. For one reason or another, throngs have chosen to come here for nearly four centuries. Choice is practically in our blood.

But other parts of the globe—especially Europe and much of the Pacific Rim—have now caught up to the U.S. and Canada in terms of material bounty and democratic freedoms. What we will discuss in this book applies to those prosperous nations as well. They too embrace a world of choice that was only a dream a century ago.

Being able to choose means being *free* to choose. But freedom need not entail choice. Indeed, for most of human history, the realization of pure freedom had usually been met by the cold reality of a *lack* of reasonable choices. People were therefore not truly empowered to shape their destinies. In fact, as I shall argue, the dearth of choice that has characterized the great majority of human lives has rendered true freedom a mere hypothetical concept. Until now. Only in relatively recent times has our standard of living been high enough, for enough of us, to feature *the ability to choose* as the preeminent influencing

factor in our *personal* lives. Freedom and choice have long reigned supreme in our national consciousness, philosophically. Yet now, the ordinary person, to an unprecedented degree, can realize the power of these principles to shape his or her life dynamically. As we will see, this pervasiveness of choice has also deeply penetrated our cultural institutions.

My primary objective is to demonstrate just how profoundly the ability to choose has transformed what we are as persons and as a society, concretely and abstractly. Choice—the relatively newfound prevalence of choice over the past century or so—molds both our lifestyles and our creative expressions in science, the arts, social science, and the humanities. Choice has played a fundamental role in forging a surprising number of cultural and intellectual developments, from existentialism to quantum physics to postmodernism. We will see that to play this role, choice has given rise to a multitude of dualisms, many of which are the dilemmas that create joy and anguish in our personal lives, and others that have forever changed the way we are led to interpret our world formally.

A secondary objective I have is to address the question of whether history is cyclic. As a nineteen-year-old college student in the late 1970s, I felt strongly that the twentieth century was unique in terms of human evolvment. Of course, people, especially young people, have felt this eternally; against this, various historians continually point out similarities to earlier times. The fall of Rome, for example, has been a standard episode used to illustrate the weakness and impending destruction of various societies. And within relatively short intervals—for example, the twentieth century—we constantly search for parallel periods. We compare the 1960s and the 1920s, or the 1990s and . . . the 1950s? History, in part, does repeat itself. But only in small part. To be specific, I will argue that by the 1960s and 1970s we reached a point of no return. Readers will notice that this turbulent era was when the main Western paradigm shifted from modernism to postmodernism, as so many commentators have noted, or when we accelerated into the postindustrial (or information) age, or (to put it differently) when manufacturing, the foundation of our economy, began to give way to service. The world has changed in a unique way over that last century.

Having mentioned postmodernism and the other labels that we have used to mark our new era in history, I will argue that they derive, in large part, from the presence of choice in our society. In turn, I will show that our ethos of choice arises from two major influences. One is the overwhelming flood of

goods made available through the mass production and distribution systems at the culmination of the Industrial Revolution. The other is an attitude, also germinating in the nineteenth century, that I call “the loss of the absolute.” But I want to make it clear that the availability of choice has been and will be the major agent of change in how we view our world—in our private decision making, in our creative expression, *and* at the metalevel where we take a critical look at who we are and what we do, the level at which we develop “isms” about our collective culture. Choice is not only the prime mover; it will be from now on the chief feature of our lives.

I should mention a qualification. Choice is the chief feature of our lives provided that our society remains stable. If readers were polled about the most important issues we face, the answers would be concerns like nuclear annihilation, terrorism (these two not being, of course, mutually exclusive), maintenance of the environment, reduction of ethnic and religious tensions, sustainability of resources, crime, poverty, and so on. Obviously, these issues are extremely important, and are far from resolved. Many see the clock edging ever closer to midnight in a world that is increasingly, and perhaps uncontrollably, chaotic. But *if*, or *while*, we survive as a species, then choice will be the ultimate factor with which we must grapple. It is true that exploring the centrality of choice in our culture may not prevent epidemic disease or nuclear catastrophe. But choice should have something to say about the bigger picture. And, as I hope to show, it does. Choices cleave our universe of discourse into two or more, usually incompatible, alternatives. Yet the decisions we face are not always best framed by choosing between having or eating our cake. Oppositions abound in our complex world; we always seem to be torn between tradition and trend, between the static and dynamic. For example, a great deal of issues in public policy and education hinge on our acceptance of cultural relativism, also known as multiculturalism. But, to use two terms from biology, *must* we choose between a completely monophyletic (e.g., “dead white European male”) culture and a totally polyphyletic (e.g., “everything is equal”) culture? I believe that a consideration of the apparent oppositions engendered by choice can lead to reasonable solutions to such issues—solutions, by the way, that are neither wishy-washy compromises nor hard-line exclusions.

As with any author, I owe a tremendous amount to others. My debt will be acknowledged in the copious attributions that follow. For now, let me mention an early source of ideas and stimulation. At age thirteen I pored over Edward Lasker’s *Modern Chess Strategy*. From this unlikely text I learned about the

importance of cross-fertilization (Jung would have preferred “synchronicity”) of ideas in art and science (and chess), a theme more vital than ever in today’s age of hyperspecialization. Perhaps it was this early exposure to the application of imported ideas that led to my interest in the oppositions between breadth and depth and between specialists and generalists.

I have been fortunate to experience countless hours of stimulating conversation with Martin Czigler, Bryony Kay, Fred Murphy, Krishna Prasad, Arvind Rajan, and Eric Theise on any number of issues. I want to thank Yasmina Mobarok for introducing me to Gallic intellectual thought. Martin, Fred, K. P., Arvind, and my mother, Florence Rosenthal, each carefully read an earlier draft and supplied me with numerous valuable comments. I have learned a great deal from Barry Schwartz. T. L. Hill took the time to educate me about the publishing industry. John A. Paulos and Miriam Solomon gave me their time and advice as well. Others who read my work and offered comments and encouragement were Don Hopkins, Cindie McLemore, Desmond Nazareth, Howard Weiss, and Bryony Kay. Most of all, I want to gratefully acknowledge Bryony’s ideas and support.

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