



Bioethics: Autonomy and Health (Fall 2012)
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G. DWORKIN ON MAKING CHOICES

The Question

- Is it always preferable to have more choices rather than fewer?
- Often assumed so...
 - John Rawls: *A Theory of Justice* (example)
 - Liberty as a primary good—what any rational person would want, regardless of what other plans, values, and desires that person has

Costs of Increasing Choices

- Information acquisition for decision-making
- Time and effort for decision-making
- Psychological effort of weighing, considering, and reflecting back on decision
- Problem of “decisional fatigue”

Another Cost: Increased Responsibility and Accountability

- Moral responsibility rests on the assumption that someone *could have done otherwise*
 - With more options, more possibilities to do otherwise
 - Burdensome to take on more and more responsibilities
- Example: more choices and decisional authority over pregnancy and abortion
 - → new responsibilities re: which babies are and are not brought into existence





Another Cost: Pressure to Conform

- More pressures to conform in ethically improper ways
 - Example: outlawing dueling → remove pressure to prove courage and honor this way
 - How might Mill respond to Dworkin's argument on this point?

Not All Limitations to Possible Decisions = Restrictions of Freedom

- “we should keep distinct the myriad of ways in which we can make things impossible to do from those very special restrictions that constitute enlarging or restricting freedom”
(71)
- Example: If I’m touching your right elbow at 11 am, it is no longer possible for someone to touch your right elbow at 11 am (without pushing me aside)
 - But my liberty is not restricted in any meaningful sense

Choice and Moral Relationships

- What constitutes fairness and commitment in some relationships is restrictions of certain freedoms
 - E.g., monogamous marriage: The partners agree *not even to consider* options for extramarital affairs
 - Some options *closed off*
- Important for harmonious functioning and civil agreements
 - Paternalism arguments

Value of Choice

- More choice is not always better than less!
- Instrumental
 - Satisfying desires
 - Develop character traits
 - Learn about yourself
 - → so should generally provide options
- Intrinsic
 - “if choice has value in virtue of being choice, then more of it must have more value” (80)
 - → problematic!

Problem with Intrinsic Value of Choice

Option A



Option B



Option C



Better to be given
choice between B
and C than to be
given A?

Discussion Questions

- Is it problematic that people have more responsibilities as the result of more options (due, e.g., to technological improvements and reduction of legal restrictions)?
- Has Dworkin convinced you that more choice is not always better than less?

Debate!



- Is it ethically preferable to have increased choices when it comes to predetermining the sex of a future child?
 - Would it be better if parents did not have the possibility of making this determination?
 - Should there be ethical limits to sex selection decisions?
 - If you think that these choices should be limited in some way, which mechanisms (legal, social, etc.) are most ethically appropriate for limiting decisions?



Questions? Comments?

