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Infinite choice?

Freeing ourselves from a cultural icon

by David McIlroy

It is our choices...that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.

J. K. Rowling¹

Summary

Our culture understands choice to be the means by which we express our freedom and individuality but sees choice as a range of consumer options. We are constantly compelled to choose, yet the unexpected result is that the things we choose have no value in themselves. God's choices have significance, involve commitments, are made relationally, and carry a cost which God himself bears. A faithful response to God's choices will make us aware that our choices matter, that to choose well is to commit to things, that our choices affect those around us, and that the cost of our choices is one we are prepared to shoulder.

How our culture construes choice

Choice is freedom for some but means burdens for others

People have always made choices but, in the West today, choice has become an ideal which defines our civilization. Our culture has seen an explosion of choices: we have more sources of entertainment than ever before, we can buy almost whatever we want on the internet, we can go to almost anywhere we want by plane; even our choices of what to eat and drink are wider than ever before. With so many choices, we imagine ourselves to be individuals and members of our chosen subcultures. Yet our hyper-choice civilization is bound together by an overarching cultural message which tells us that to choose is to be free. Despite its pluralism contemporary secular culture is unified and dominated by its valorisation of choice.

The message that choice equals freedom contains some truth: I enjoy greater freedom than a prisoner because my choices about what to do with my time are subject to fewer constraints. My ability to play a part, through voting, in choosing my country's government, gives me a measure of political freedom which the citizens of Syria do not currently enjoy.

However, behind the façade of ever-increasing opportunities to fulfil our desires, things are not quite what they seem. It is choices of a particular type which have been multiplied: choices which are offered to us as *consumers*. Choices are available only to those who have the buying power, the health and the time to exercise them. If you are impoverished, suffering from long-term illness or infirmity, or committed to the demands of caring for others or work, then you may have few choices open to you.

The freedom to choose amongst an ever-increasing range of goods and services is supported by a free market. Yet behind the rhetoric of choice and freedom lies a reality of oppression. The promotion of choice turns out not to be a promotion of choice *per se*, but rather the privileging of one set of choices over another. It is because consumer choice takes priority that the shop worker who desires to spend time with their family on Sundays is denied the ability to choose not to work on that day. It is because consumer choice takes priority that the hoteliers who wish to let double rooms only to married couples are adjudged to have acting unlawfully.² It is because consumer choice takes priority that clothes and products are manufactured at the lowest possible price in countries where the labour conditions are appalling.

The tyranny of choice as the enemy of relationships

Our culture teaches that by choosing to consume an endless stream of the latest fashion, gadgets, products and services we validate ourselves and express our

¹ *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Bloomsbury, 1998.

² *Bull v Hall and Preddy* [2012] EWCA Civ 83, *Black and Morgan v Wilkinson* [2012] Eq LR 1090.

individuality. Exercising our right to choose is the way we have been programmed to function. Yet our choices have consequences for our relationships: the decision whether or not to take a new job involves weighing up costs and benefits, not just to myself, but to my family, to my church and my community. Although choice is not a zero-sum game, there is usually a cost associated with a choice: the question is, who pays that cost? When choice is equated with personal freedom, the cost to others is disregarded.

If we have to keep on choosing in order to be free, everything, even our most intimate relationships, is reduced to momentary decisions. Against this, Christianity recognises that there is an aspect of what it means to be human which is even more fundamental than the ability to choose, and that is the ability to love. To choose is to decide what to love and how much to love it. That is why it is reasonable to choose to commit to lifelong faithfulness to another human being and to make no end of sacrifices in order to see that person and others within the family circle flourish.³

Because our culture sees choice as freedom what we choose is disposable

The emphasis on choice has made us a generation paralysed by FOMO (fear of missing out),⁴ driven to pursue the widest possible range of experiences by YOLO (you only live once).⁵ The divorce rate is rising as people choose freedom over working through their difficulties with the life partner whom they chose in the past. But the number of people choosing to get married in the first place is also falling. Restricting one's future freedom of choice is seen as too much of a risk.

If choice is equated with freedom, choice is dissociated from commitment. Yet, from a Christian perspective, the most important choices we can make are choices to commit: to enter into a lifelong marriage and a lifetime of following Jesus.

The vision of choice as freedom is a tyrannous distortion. The man who always keeps his options open is the man whose life is empty and meaningless. This is brutally exposed in the 2009 Oscar-nominated film, *Up in the Air*, starring George Clooney. Clooney plays Ryan Bingham whose job is to fly across America delivering the bad news to people who have lost their jobs. He also delivers motivational speeches in which he encourages his audience to travel light by divesting themselves of relationships, things, and other burdens. Then one person who has been told by him they have been dismissed commits suicide. Ryan can't even remember their face.

It is because our interpersonal relations do and should involve mutual dependency that we cannot always keep our options open. When one person chooses to reject the obligations of commitment and responsibility, others are left behind. They did not enjoy the freedom to choose in the first place. They were already committed, but now they must continue to bear an ever greater burden.

The meaning of choice

If consumer choice has the potential to distort our relationships and to impose costs on others, why is its cultural status subject to so little effective questioning? Choice is seen as supremely

important in our culture because we equate choosing with freedom and see choosing as the means of bestowing value on things. Today, something is seen as valuable *because it has been chosen*. Its value results from the choice which was made to value it.

Ever since Alfred Marshall published *Principles of Economics* in 1890, economics has taken choice, measured by the price people are prepared to pay for things, to be the proxy for the good. In the absence of faith in the idea that there is an absolute good, the relative good is identified with what people choose. This leads to the view that the more choices we have, the better off we are.

Yet what we choose has less and less long-term significance. The must-have gadget we bought today will be outdated and old-fashioned in six months at most. In the absence of any objective criteria for judging whether something is better or worse, all that is left is the valuing of newness for its own sake. The emphasis on the role of choice in attributing value to things, to decisions and to life-projects, strips them of their objective meaning. The result is that we are constantly forced to choose with no end in sight. This trajectory leads us to a point where choice is the supreme good because there are no other values left.⁶

Unprepared to admit the existence of objective right and wrong, our culture treats all choices as matters of taste, as if one's choice whether or not to believe in God, for example, were no more important than the decision whether or not to have milk in your coffee. That you make a free choice is more important than what you choose. This account of the relationship between choice and value is a plausible one in relation to issues which are matters of mere taste. But consumer choice has been generalised to become the dominant paradigm through which all of life is viewed.

Sexual activity of whatever sort is acceptable so long as it has been chosen by legally competent parties.⁷ The pro-abortion and euthanasia agenda is not presented as a pro-death agenda but as giving people choice, in one case over the beginning of another's life, in the other over the end of their own. Choice is now also used to measure education: parents are better off if they have a wider choice of schools; students are better off if they are given more choice about what they are taught, regardless of the views of the teachers about what the curriculum ought to be.

This consumerist approach to choice has philosophical roots. If, as naturalism does, we deny inherent meaning, significance or signification in the world, then choice is all that is left. If, as some liberal philosophers do, we make individual freedom the highest good, it is easy to slide from the belief that we should be free to choose our values for ourselves into thinking that there are no objective values and that values are created by our choices.

If I have chosen this, if this represents what I want to do, then this is the right thing *for me*, because I want it to be true, I think it will be good for me, and I regard it as beautiful. At that point, your responsibility is to respect my choice. The respect that is increasingly demanded has three dimensions: you must not interfere with my choice, you must not criticise my choice and if the enjoyment of my choice requires your co-operation,

3 David Foster Wallace, commencement speech to Kenyon College in 2005, available online at <http://moreintelligentlife.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words>.

4 Claire Cohen, 'FoMo: Do you have a Fear of Missing Out?', *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 2003, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10061863/FoMo-Do-you-have-a-Fear-of-Missing-Out.html>.

5 Ben Zimmer, 'What is YOLO? Only teenagers know for sure', *The Boston Globe*, 26 August 2012, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2012/08/25/what-yolo-only-teenagers-know-for-sure/1dso4FecrYzLa4KOOYpXO/story.html>

6 Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press, 2010, p.105.

7 Guy Brandon has explored the inadequacies of this individualistic and atomistic approach to sex in *Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009, and 'Free Sex: Who Pays? Moral Hazard and Sexual Ethics', *Cambridge Papers*, 2011, Vol.20, No.4.

you must provide that co-operation. To criticise another's choices is therefore to challenge the ultimate value in our civilization, it is to commit the ultimate wrong of being intolerant and judgemental.

Choice is presented as the means of avoiding the hard questions about how to organise our society, but this device only works if we pretend (as the philosophers J. S. Mill and Ronald Dworkin did) that many of my choices do not *really* harm you, or if some choices are given absolute priority over others, most dramatically exemplified by the way in which the choice of the expectant mother⁸ is given an absolute priority over the lifetime of choices which the aborted foetus will be denied.

If there is no value other than choice, then what is true, what is good, what is beautiful are no longer characteristics which exist objectively, out there. Instead of taking place in a morally ordered universe, our choices come to be seen as existing in a moral vacuum, out of which values are called into existence by the sheer *fiat* of our willing them. My choices have no meaning beyond the fact that *I* have made them; but if choice is the only criterion then why do *I* matter at all?

The elevation of choice leaves the origin of my choices unquestioned. The influences and drives behind my choices are not examined. Yet, my choosing is all too often nothing more than the 'freedom' to be a slave to my desires, whether natural, culturally influenced, or manufactured (1 Peter 4:3). If there is nothing inherently worth choosing, then our choices have no meaning. It follows that all choices are nothing more than personal preferences. Therefore, religion becomes nothing more than a belief in the idea of a (personal) God which some people find congenial. The paradox is that our culture's emphasis on choosing renders our choices either meaningless or a mere matter of taste.

In contrast, Christianity sees choosing wisely as the ability to weigh options in terms of right or wrong, good or evil, better or worse. To choose to follow Christ is not to bestow value upon him but to recognise his infinite worth. Instead of taking our desires as read, Christianity makes us critical of them, urging us to discipline and order them under God.

Moreover, the Bible inverts our culture's understanding of the connection between choice and value. Where our culture believes that we can create value in the things we choose, the Bible stresses that our own value is affected by our choices. If the things we choose are worthless, we degrade and devalue ourselves (2 Kings 17:15; Jeremiah 2:5; Romans 3:12).

There is an important difference between emphasising choice because choice is the only thing that matters and recognising the importance of choice because it matters what you choose. The Christian account of choice does not devalue choice. Choice remains significant because the choice is between things some of which are genuinely good and some of which are genuinely evil, and because some ideas, objects and desires are better than others. The choice counts.

God's choices

Our culture's approach to choice is not wholly wrong, but is deeply distorted; it treats our human choices as if they were like God's choices rather than situating them as a faithful response to the choices which God had already made. Whereas our choices are situated and shaped by our culture, God is the only agent whose freedom of choice is not conditioned or affected by anything outside of himself.

God's choices have significance. God's choice to create brought a universe into being. It created value *ex nihilo* because out of the formless void God brought into being an ordering of things that were good. God's choice to redeem humanity has cosmic implications. The world which God made was a world which was good and which had rich potential. God chose to set his affection on this world. That divine choice has given this world unique value. Within this world, God chose to set his affection on humanity, and to make them in his image. Those divine choices have given human beings unique value. From this we might conclude that things and persons can acquire value because they are chosen to be loved. This choice to love may be beneficent, if the love which is bestowed leads the lover to pursue the good of the beloved, or it may be idolatrous, if the love replaces the love of God.

Reflecting on God's choices reveals that our culture's view that choices create, rather than recognise, value is a distorted but not a wholly false picture. If we think about an activity like taking a lump of wood and making a sculpture out of it, or teaching a class of schoolchildren, we can see how our choices can take something which has potential and develop it. When we choose something, we need not do so solely because of its present value. Our choice may be linked to the value it had in the past (as in the broken toy that we cannot bring ourselves to throw out) or to the potential it has in the future (as in the painting that we are working on). We see elements of both these things in God's choices. God chose to continue working within a fallen world because it was originally created good and because God could see the potential for that world to be redeemed, restored and one day made fully new.

Commitment is the second feature of God's choices. God's choice to love the world was not like a human choice to love a new designer toy. It was not a fleeting fancy, but was expressed in a series of covenants. Through those covenants God committed himself: to blessing the human race (Genesis 1:26–30), to preserving the world from flood (Genesis 9:15), to giving Israel the promised land (Genesis 12:7; 15:7), to making Israel a holy nation (Exodus 19:6; Leviticus 26:12), to establishing the kingship of the line of David forever (2 Samuel 7:12–16). God's choices were choices to love, and they involved God in commitments to humanity, to Israel and to the line of David. Those covenants found fulfilment in the new covenant in which Jesus showed us the full extent of God's love.

Third, God's choices are made relationally. Our culture encourages us to make our choices as individuals. The Bible gives us a very different picture of God's choices. In Genesis 1:26 God says: 'Let us make man in our image.' The creation was the work of the triune God, of the Father, the Son and the Spirit choosing together and working together to effect that choice. So, too, redemption was the choice of the triune God, as the Father sends the Son in the power of the Spirit to rescue fallen humanity. God does not choose selfishly and individualistically; God chooses lovingly and in relationship. God's choices find expression in covenant: in a commitment to those who are chosen.

Fourth, our culture feeds us the message that it is legitimate for us to disregard or discount the effect of our choices on others. No thought is given to the impact our choice to buy the cheapest possible clothing has on the wages and working conditions of those who make them. The pain caused to others by our decision to end a relationship in order to pursue self-fulfilment may be a matter for regret, but our culture does not entertain the

⁸ Though, the 'choice' of the expectant mother is often a desperate one dictated by the choice of the expectant father to walk away from his responsibilities.

suggestion that the impact on others could be a reason for choosing differently. God's choices are made on a different basis. When God chooses, it is God who bears the cost. God, having chosen to create this world, has committed himself to work within it, to redeem it and one day to re-create it. God's choice to enter into covenants with Adam and with Noah meant that God has had to bear with sinful humanity down the ages. God's choice to enter into covenant with Moses meant that God had to stand with unfaithful Israel. God's choice to redeem humanity meant that Jesus had to die on the cross. God knows that choice is a costly business but, instead of imposing the costs on others, God has borne the cost of his choices himself. We can go beyond this and say that when God chooses, God chooses to bless and to serve others. In the same way, what we choose should be a blessing and a service to others.

Choosing in the light of God's choices

A biblical understanding of choice sees that some choices are significant: there are high stakes. It matters whether we choose to pursue goodness or to do evil. It matters whether we choose to follow God or to give ourselves up to idolatry. We also recognise that the way in which we choose has been affected by the Fall, our desires have become distorted and disordered. We are apt to chase after things which are not good for us, or to attribute absolute or excessive value to what is of only relative or limited good. It is true that to choose something is to value it, but some things are worth less than the value we ascribe to them and other things are worthless. Jesus called his followers to choose above all to follow him and to seek his kingdom (Matthew 6:33), to choose something so valuable that it is worth giving up everything else for (Matthew 13:45–46).

A biblical understanding of choice sees that to choose is to commit. When a Christian makes a choice they are making a commitment; they are committed to paying the cost that that choice entails. When a man marries a woman, he not only chooses his wife and makes a commitment to love her, he also commits to the forsaking of all other women. By recognising that to choose is to commit, we are freed from the tyranny of choice. We can find earthly fulfilment in lifelong relationships, in long-term projects, in seeing things through to completion rather than being trapped in the meaninglessness and shallowness which comes from always keeping our options open. We can even choose to deny ourselves, to determine that our commitments eliminate any further choices, because of our hope that our true freedom lies beyond this life.

Once we recognise that our choices are significant and that they involve commitment, we can begin to make our choices relationally rather than individualistically. Instead of the impact of our choices on others being an 'externality' which we disregard, the effect of our choices on others becomes a critical

factor in our decision-making. I begin to recognise that, although my choices are dear to me, they come with consequences, and therefore at a cost, for those around me.

The Christian understands that the choices we make not only affect ourselves but also impact on others. We will not think of ourselves as isolated, self-sufficient individuals when we choose. Instead we will make our choices in consultation with those we love and we will weigh the costs of those choices together. The Christian understands that choices involve costs, but the Christian will not wish to impose those costs on others. Instead, the Christian will seek to bear those costs themselves. Thus, having discussed it with their children, Christian grandparents might choose to continue to live in the city in order to be within reach of their grandchildren.

So our choices are to be choices for which we, and not others, bear the cost; they are to be choices to commit and to serve others; choices which both recognise inherent good and which, through our commitment and service, enhance and nurture goodness; choices which are made relationally, and choices which find their significance because of our primary choice to follow Jesus.

Conclusion

Whereas our culture tells us that to choose is to be free, Christianity teaches that to love is to be free. It is in love and service that we find our identity and our significance, not by making incessant choices. Our culture encourages us to defend our ability to make unencumbered choices at the cost of loving personal relationships. God calls us to commit to one another in fulfilling, costly love. Our culture claims that our choices bestow value; Christianity teaches us to recognise that the world has value because God has created and redeemed it in order to restore it. Our culture asserts that by choosing we create and validate our own identities; the Holy Spirit confirms in our hearts that our identity and value do not come from our choices but from the fact that God the Father has chosen us, in Christ.⁹ Our culture presents us with endless consumer options, many of which are insignificant; Christianity stresses that our choices are significant, that on them depends the outcome of our lives on earth and our eternal destiny. Our culture asserts that our choices create value; Christianity tells us that we are valued because God has chosen to create and to redeem us.

⁹ Eph. 1:11; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:2.

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