

## INTRODUCTION

# BITTEN APPLES

Does freedom of choice promote human well-being? Many people think so. They insist that each of us is the best judge of what will promote our own well-being. They argue that people should be allowed to go their own way, so long as they are not harming others.

But what if people do not know how to find their way? What if they have no idea?

For many of us, *navigability* is a serious problem—perhaps the most serious problem of all. Navigating an unfamiliar city or an airport might be baffling. The same might be true of the health care bureaucracy or the criminal justice system. When life is hard to navigate, people are less free. They are unable to get where they

want to go. The challenge arises not only when we are looking for literal destinations (a gasoline station, a bank, a doctor's office), but also when we are seeking some kind of outcome (good health, a visa, a decent place to live, personal safety, economic security, a satisfying relationship, a good job).

Obstacles to navigability are major sources of unfreedom in human life. They create a kind of bondage. They make people feel lost. In wealthy countries and poor ones, they reduce people's well-being. Freedom of choice is important, even critical, but it is undermined or even destroyed if life cannot be navigated. Obstacles to navigability have been the great blind spot in the Western philosophical tradition. They deserve sustained attention—not only from philosophers and political theorists but also from economists, psychologists, designers, architects, computer scientists, lawyers,

public officials, the private sector, and ordinary citizens.

Navigability is a particularly difficult challenge when people face problems of self-control. When people cannot overcome those problems, their freedom is badly compromised. Consider smoking, drinking, overeating, gambling, and drug use. Addiction is the most extreme case, but self-control problems are everywhere.<sup>1</sup> A special obstacle to solving those problems is “present bias”: people often focus on today and not tomorrow, which means that they will choose short-term pleasure and avoid short-term pain, even when that choice makes their lives worse (and less meaningful). At the same time, people often know that that they are making a mistake. They want help. They seek to find the right path. With modest interventions, people can solve self-control problems—and do so while retaining their

freedom (and from a certain point of view, even increasing it).

While my main focus is on navigability, I shall also be asking these questions about freedom and well-being: *What if people's free choices are decisively influenced by some aspect of the social environment, and they are happy either way? In such cases, how should designers of the social environment—employers, teachers, doctors, investment advisers, companies, governments—proceed?* As we shall see, these questions are both difficult and fundamental.

In almost everyone's life, some free choice has made all the difference—even if that choice was the product of serendipity, or a small or seemingly accidental factor. At the last minute, you might have taken one course in high school rather than another, and the teacher changed the course of your life. On a lark, you might have gone to a party that you dreaded, and you

happened to catch someone's eye. That someone is now your spouse. Or some work commitment was cancelled, and so you visited a city, far away, to spend a little time with a friend. To your amazement, you fell in love with the place. It is now your home.

Writers of science fiction (along with some philosophers and historians) like to speak of “parallel worlds” or “counterfactual history.” I am focusing on something similar and narrower: cases in which some feature of the social environment leads people to choose Option A, Option B, Option C, or Option D—and choosers end up glad after the fact, never wishing things should be different, *whatever they chose*.

Some such cases are fairly mundane. For example, we can imagine situations in which people would be content with one or another health care plan, and what they choose is a product of a seemingly innocuous social cue

(such as a font or color on a website). Other cases involve large features of people's lives—situations in which people would be content with one or another city, spouse, or career—and a seemingly innocuous social cue (an advertisement, a smile, a word of encouragement, a path of least resistance) makes all the difference. In the hardest cases, where free choices can lead in different directions, there is no escape from evaluating outcomes by asking about what promotes people's well-being. At least there is no escape from that question if a designer of the social environment—an employer, a doctor, a government—is deciding what kind of social environment to design.

### **A STRANGE NEW SMELL**

Two passages will help frame the discussion. The first should be familiar:

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.*

*Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.<sup>2</sup>*

The second passage is from a magnificent novel on the topic of freedom, A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), after a fateful choice (and yes, it involved a love affair):

*In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crushed wood and splashed*

*sap, a tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction, and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful.*<sup>3</sup>

In *Genesis*, Adam and Eve exercised their freedom of choice, and everything was lost. (Much was gained as well.) Byatt is also speaking of a free choice and a kind of fall. Although her tale overlaps with that of *Genesis*, her account is far more upbeat. There is a smell of death and destruction, but it is full of life and hope. Let us be clear: Every human being is blessed to experience that smell.

Do people's free choices really make their lives go better? The liberal philosophical tradition offers a simple answer: *Yes*.<sup>4</sup> Artists, novelists, psychologists, and theologians offer a more complicated answer, and they are right to insist that the simple answer is far too simple.



People might have no idea how to get where they want to go. Like Adam and Eve, they can be tempted. Sometimes they lack self-control. Background conditions greatly matter. Sometimes people's choices are not, in the deepest sense, their own; they are deprived, deceived, or manipulated. Sometimes people lack crucial information. Sometimes their preferences are a product of injustice or deprivation. Sometimes they simply blunder. As a result, their lives go much worse.

To make progress, I will focus largely on what Richard Thaler and I call “nudges”:<sup>5</sup> interventions that steer people in certain directions, but that also preserve freedom of choice. But I shall have something to say about coercion as well.

The topic of navigability does not, of course, come anywhere close to exhausting the topic of freedom. I will not, for example, explore the

differences between “negative freedom” and “positive freedom”; say a word about freedom of speech and freedom of religion; make a final judgment about John Stuart Mill’s Harm Principle;<sup>6</sup> or investigate the claim that property rights, conferred by the state, can be essential to freedom, or an abridgement of freedom. My hope is that my tighter focus can offer some new perspectives on both the human condition and enduring problems, some of which are especially pressing in the current period.