



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion

Research at LSE ■

# **When and why might choice in public services have intrinsic (dis)value?**

**Aveek Bhattacharya**

CASE/220  
July 2020

Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion  
London School of Economics  
Houghton Street  
London WC2A 2AE  
CASE enquiries – tel: 020 7955 6679

## **Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion**

The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), within the Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines (STICERD). Our focus is on exploration of different dimensions of social disadvantage, particularly from longitudinal and neighbourhood perspectives, and examination of the impact of public policy.

In addition to our discussion paper series (CASEpapers), we produce occasional summaries of our research in CASEbriefs, and reports from various conferences and activities in CASereports. All these publications are available to download free from our website.

For further information on the work of the Centre, please contact the Centre Manager, Annie-Rose Nicholas, on:

Telephone: UK+20 7955 6679  
Email: a.nicholas1@lse.ac.uk  
Web site: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case>

© Aveek Bhattacharya

All rights reserved. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission provided that full credit, including © notice, is given to the source.

## **Editorial note**

Aveek Bhattacharya is a PhD student in the Department of Social Policy and CASE, LSE.

This work was supported by an Economic and Social Research Council studentship. The author is grateful to Irene Bucelli, Tania Burchardt, Eleni Karagiannaki, Julian Le Grand, Robert Simpson, Chris Smith, Adam Swift and Polly Vizard for comments on earlier drafts of this work.

## **Abstract**

Governments in several countries have sought to increase choice in public services. Proponents claim the value of such choice is both instrumental (it improves outcomes) and intrinsic (choice is valuable in itself). Yet while the instrumental benefits of such measures are strongly contested, the supposed intrinsic value of public service choice is both normatively and empirically underexplored. This paper draws on the philosophical and psychological literature on the costs and benefits of choice to identify why and under what circumstances choice in public services might have intrinsic value (or indeed, disvalue). Through this process, it develop a framework of empirical questions that can be used to analyse the intrinsic (dis)value of particular choice reforms.

Key words: choice, intrinsic value, quasi-markets

JEL number: I0, I31, I38

Corresponding author: a.bhattacharya2@lse.ac.uk

## Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. What is intrinsic value? .....	2
3. Why might choice increase/reduce subjective welfare? .....	4
4. When and why might choice support freedom or autonomy? .....	7
4.1 <i>Choice and freedom</i> .....	7
5. A framework for future research .....	14
6. Conclusion .....	17

## 1. Introduction

In the past 30-40 years, governments in several countries have sought to increase user choice in public services (Tummers et al., 2013). Among other reforms, families have been given greater opportunity to choose between schools, patients have been encouraged to choose between hospitals, and care recipients have been given the chance to purchase their own services (6, 2003; Blomqvist, 2004; Musset, 2012).

There are two possible justifications for this expansion of choice in public services. The first is that choice has *instrumental* value – it leads to better outcomes, such as higher quality, more efficient or more equitable services. The second is that choice has *intrinsic* value – giving people choice is a good thing in itself, regardless of its consequences.

Supporters of public service choice have made both claims. David Halpern, who implemented the UK Government's choice reforms in the 2000s, believes that "There are strong arguments for saying that extending choice and greater responsibility is both a good in its own right and an effective means to an end" (McAteer, 2005:80). Julian Le Grand (2009:10–12), another architect of choice in British public services, argues that reforms should not only incentivise service providers to be more responsive to user needs, but also better respect users' autonomy. Herbert Gintis (1995) insists that "it is a mistake to evaluate the competitive delivery of educational services on the basis of traditional educational performance measures alone, since consumers value the ability to choose, independent from any measurable effects of such choice on standard measures of educational performance".<sup>1</sup>

Yet academic assessments of choice in public services have had a tendency to fall into exactly the mistake Gintis describes, focusing overwhelmingly on the outcomes of choice reforms – mortality rates, educational attainment, levels of segregation - and neglecting arguments around the intrinsic value of choice. I suspect there are two reasons for this. First, the claim that choice in public services has intrinsic value is seen as a philosophical, rather than an empirical claim. Consequently, in contrast to the highly empirically contested debate over whether choice increases efficiency or equity, relatively few empirical studies have looked at the intrinsic value of choice. Second, many people see the claim that choice has intrinsic value as philosophically straightforward or uninteresting, and so in need of little defence or elaboration. Consequently, it has been neglected by philosophers as well as social scientists.

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Klein and Miller (1995), Dowding (1992:313), Goodwin (2009)

In this paper, I argue against both of these misapprehensions. The intrinsic value of choice in public services is not purely a philosophical matter, but also entails a number of empirical questions. At the same time, the claim that choice in public services is intrinsically valuable is not philosophically trivial, but requires further analysis and development.

The purpose of this paper is to understand why, and under what circumstances, choice in public services might have intrinsic value (or indeed, disvalue). Through this process I develop a framework that can be used to analyse the intrinsic (dis)value of particular choice reforms. The framework sets out the normative and empirical questions we need to answer in order to determine whether choice in a particular service in a particular context is good or bad. For philosophers and political theorists, it identifies the relevant normative values in need of elaboration, defence or trading-off. For empirical researchers, it provides a set of research questions to answer given different normative positions. It guides them in what to look in evaluating choice policies, if value resides in subjective welfare, freedom, autonomy, or some combination of the three.

I do not, in this paper, attempt to adjudicate between normative claims, or to argue for a particular position. I seek only to describe, clarify and explore the implications of different normative positions.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 develops a clearer working definition of intrinsic value in relation to public services. Section 3 considers how such choice might increase or decrease subjective welfare. Section 4 explores the relationship between public service choice, freedom and autonomy. Section 5 brings this material together to produce the analytical framework. Section 6 concludes with some consideration of how this framework may be applied to future research and discussion.

## **2. What is intrinsic value?**

Dowding and John (2009:219) provide the most explicit attempt in the literature to distinguish the intrinsic and instrumental value of public service choice:

We define choice as being instrumentally valuable in the sense that increasing choice in public services brings welfare gains through efficiency by the signals that choice gives to providers (generally though not exclusively through market or quasi-market processes). We define choice as being intrinsically desirable if it is desired for itself, even though why it is desired might be further explicated (for example, choice enhances

individual autonomy). (In that sense any intrinsic value can be further justified instrumentally)<sup>2</sup>

More pithily, they say that "Choice might be valued instrumentally: for what it brings; or it might be valued intrinsically: for what it is" (Dowding and John, 2009:223).

The first of these definitions is incomplete: Dowding and John identify efficiency as the only instrumental value, yet choice in public services may have any number of other positive consequences that are instrumentally desirable – for example, reducing inequality or social segregation, increasing convenience for users, or allowing them to better live by their values. The second of these definitions is rather ambiguous: where do we draw the line between 'what choice is', and 'what choice brings'? Choice might 'bring' a person both enhanced autonomy and also the ability to see a better doctor. The increase in autonomy may follow more immediately and may seem in some sense to attach more closely to the choice, but both can reasonably be seen as consequences of the choice. On what grounds can we say that one of these consequences is 'intrinsic', and the other 'instrumental'?

I believe the most helpful way of making sense of the distinction is by distinguishing the value of *choosing* from the value of the *outcome* of choice. What we call intrinsic value, I suggest, is any value that flows from choosing – the fact that we have choice, the ability to consider options X and Y, and the process of deciding between them. What we call instrumental value, I suggest, is the value that flows from X or Y actually coming about.

To see how these come apart, consider the following thought experiment. Imagine in world A, everybody has full choice of schools. By contrast, in world B, an omniscient planner can anticipate with perfect accuracy which school every person *would* choose and allocates it to them without actually giving them any say in the matter. The final allocation of schools is identical between world A and world B. If world A is nonetheless better than world B in any respect, that represents intrinsic value. If world A is in any respects *worse* than world B, that represents intrinsic *dis*value.

In this paper I consider what I believe to be the two main reasons why there might be value in the process of choosing, or the mere fact of having a choice. The first is that choosing increases subjective welfare. The second is that it increases freedom and/or autonomy. The following sections take each of these in turn.

---

<sup>2</sup> Note this definition – and the way I use the term – is rather different from how the concept of intrinsic value is used in wider philosophical discourse (eg Bradley (2006))

### **3. Why might choice increase/reduce subjective welfare?**

Subjective welfare theories, as the name suggests, involve the claim that something has value to the extent that it makes people better or worse-off subjectively, according to their own perception. This can be cashed out in terms of 'desire theories' or 'affective theories'.

#### **3.1 Desire Theories**

According to desire theories, people are better off to the extent that their desires are fulfilled (Heathwood, 2015; Crisp, 2017). The world is a better place if people get more of the things they want, and the stronger a person's desire for something, the better it is for them to have it. This implies that the intrinsic value of choice in any area depends on the extent to which people want choice over it (independent of any expectation that this choice will lead to better outcomes). This, in turn, leads to three empirical questions. First, do people want to be able to choose their public services? Second, how strong is their desire for choice? Third, does this conflict with any other desires, and how strong are these opposing desires?

These three empirical questions are sufficient for those who locate value in satisfying *actual* desires. However, on some versions of desire theory, what is valuable is a person getting what they *hypothetically* would want if they were fully informed of the relevant facts and fully appreciative of the benefits and drawbacks of different courses of action (Brandt, 1979:110–29; Heathwood, 2015). Given how far the formation of real-life desires is from such idealised circumstances, this casts doubt on whether empirical evidence on people's desire for public service choice is relevant at all to determining its value. Yet Crisp (2017) argues that even under idealised desire theories, it is still a necessary condition for a person to actually have the desire in question for fulfilling that desire to have any value. Even if my palate could hypothetically be trained to enjoy foie gras, on his view it does not benefit me to give me foie gras if I do not yet have the taste. Thus even idealised desire theories may be sensitive to empirical evidence on actual desires as a way of ruling out or ruling in possible sources of value.

#### **3.2 Affective Theories**

An alternative way of conceptualising subjective welfare is by reference to people's feelings, through concepts like happiness, pleasure, satisfaction, fulfilment or suffering. We can label such theories 'affective' – they all entail the view that value consists in positive feelings, and disvalue in negative feelings. Precisely *which* feelings have value – the pleasantness of our experiences, our moment-to-moment emotional states, or our overall

evaluation of our lives - is a matter of ongoing philosophical debate (Haybron, 2011). For our purposes, the distinctions do not matter too much.

From an affective perspective, there are a number of ways public service choice might have intrinsic value. Choosing – learning about alternatives, imagining what they would be like, trying them out - can be enjoyable, which is why shopping can be a recreational activity (Dworkin, 1982; Dowding and John, 2009). While Barnes & Prior (1995) express scepticism that choosing public services can be as fun as shopping for holidays or clothes, there is some evidence that, for example, people enjoy school open days (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997).

Likely more relevant are the negative psychological effects of being denied choice (Goodwin, 2009; Le Grand and New, 2015; Bucelli, 2017). It has been argued that people have increasingly come to expect choice in most domains of their life, and so are liable to feel disappointed if these expectations are frustrated (Hargreaves, 1996a; Dowding and John, 2009). Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that humans have a basic psychological need for autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2015). Consequently, our mental well-being is greatly influenced by whether we feel our actions to be truly volitional or controlled by forces external to us. Insofar as we feel forced, compelled or influenced to pursue a course of action that we do not endorse or identify with, this has a negative effect on our happiness (Botti and Iyengar, 2006; Moller et al., 2006). At the extreme, this can feed into a broader sense of disempowerment and helplessness – for example, Seligman (1975) finds that a chronic lack of control over one's life can lead to depression.

It is important to note that SDT emphasises *perceived control*, rather than choice per se. The two often go together, but not always. For example, if the agent believes that their options are trivial or meaningless, if they feel overwhelmed by the number of options, or if they feel they are being compelled to choose, choice can actually undermine perceived control (Moller et al., 2006).

Indeed, these considerations lead us naturally to the possibility that greater choice might in fact *reduce* subjective welfare. There are at least five different mechanisms by which this might occur.

First, choice can be effortful, and so carries opportunity costs in terms of time, energy and cognitive resources (Baumeister et al., 1998). Many choices involve acquiring information (for example, researching options, physically exploring them, seeking advice from others), processing this information (reading, watching, reflecting on all this material), deliberation, and sometimes discussion or negotiation (for choices made jointly with

others). Time spent choosing is time that could have been used for other important or enjoyable activities (Schwartz, 2005:120–4).

Second, choosing may involve confronting difficult, complicated and unpleasant trade-offs. It can be hard to evaluate and compare alternatives with costs and benefits across a range of domains, which may seem incommensurable. For example, medical practice A may be best located, practice B may be more familiar, and practice C might be higher rated. Confronting these trade-offs – recognising that we cannot get everything that we want – can be disagreeable and cause a degree of emotional conflict (Schwartz, 2005:124–37; Botti and Iyengar, 2006:27).

A third important consideration is the idea of pressure, which can be felt as a psychological burden. To have to make a choice is to take responsibility for the outcome, and to be culpable for the consequences. The knowledge that we are the cause of a suboptimal outcome, that we have nobody else to blame, can make things worse. Thus the act of choosing can become inflected with the fear of making a mistake. (Dworkin, 1982; Schwartz, 2005:147–65).

A fourth, associated, problem is that of regret. This operates prior to the choice being made, through the anticipation of regret, which leads to a fear of closing off opportunities. We feel reluctant to act because we are wary of committing to an option and missing out on the alternatives. It also occurs after a decision is made – so called ‘buyer’s remorse’. We remain concerned that we might have done better, looking over our shoulder at missed possibilities (Dworkin, 1982; Schwartz, 2005:147–65).

Finally, having choice may serve to raise our expectations about how good the chosen option will be (Schwartz, 2009; Chernev et al., 2015). Since the outcome is now under our control, and in principle we have the ability to find the option best suited to our preferences, it is natural to anticipate a better outcome. By contrast, if we know we have to ‘take what we are given’, we will likely expect less. When it then comes to making a choice, these elevated standards may make our options appear worse, which will make the choice process more frustrating and unpleasant. It may also increase our disappointment with the outcome if it cannot meet these expectations – although it is also possible that we may feel better disposed towards an outcome by virtue of having chosen it (Lind et al., 2017).<sup>3</sup> Worse still, there is the potential for a toxic interaction between the raised expectations caused by choice and its tendency to encourage regret. As

---

<sup>3</sup> If a person’s subjective evaluation of an outcome is better or worse because they chose it, is that intrinsic or instrumental (dis)value? I am inclined to say it is intrinsic because the (dis)value is independent of the outcome itself (i.e. the child may go to the same school they would have been allocated), and it is only the *perception* of the outcome that has changed.

expectations exceed what is possible given our options, this makes disappointment more likely, and this disappointment is then exacerbated by the perception that we have nobody to blame but ourselves.

All these arguments rest fundamentally on empirical, rather than normative, claims. They imply that to understand whether expanding choice in public services is positive or negative for subjective welfare we need to ask the following questions:

- (i) Is choosing enjoyable?
- (ii) Do choosers feel empowered or controlled?
- (iii) Does choosing have substantial opportunity costs in terms of time, energy or mental resources?
- (iv) Does it involve trade-offs producing mental conflict?
- (v) Is choice pressurised?
- (vi) Does choice generate (the anticipation of) regret?
- (vii) Does choice unrealistically raise expectations or improve experiences of outcomes?

## **4. When and why might choice support freedom or autonomy?**

### **4.1 Choice and freedom**

For some, it is almost axiomatic that more choice is better than less (Hargreaves, 1996b:133). According to certain conceptions of freedom, a person's freedom is by definition a function of the number of options they have (Pattanaik and Xu, 1990; Sugden, 2003:797–803). Anything that increases their options<sup>4</sup>, therefore, is valuable because it enhances their freedom.

Other theorists reach a similar conclusion by different routes. Carter (1999, 2004) claims that a person's freedom depends on the extent of their available action. Insofar as providing choice makes particular actions available, it increases freedom. Hurka (1987) argues that there is value in agency, defined as having a causal impact on the world. For Hurka, agency can be negative as well as positive. If I choose option A over options B, C and D, I am causally responsible not only for A occurring, but also for not-

---

<sup>4</sup> Including providing choice in the first place, which increases the number of options from zero.

B, not-C and not-D. Choice provides more options, and the more options I have, the more outcomes I can block, and the greater my agency.

At the same time, it is widely accepted, even by those who believe that all choices have some value (Carter, 1999:119–25), that some choices are more valuable for freedom than others. Most accounts suggest that the value of a choice depends on two factors. First, its *significance*: how important are the goals, desires or activities it allows people to pursue? In this vein, Norman (1981) argues that a choice of careers is more valuable than a choice of washing powders, because a person's career matters more to their life. Second, the *quality of the options* the choice provides. This is typically a function of the desirability of the options, and their diversity - how different they are from each other and existing options. Sen (1990) claims that a person choosing between the options {great, terrific, wonderful} is freer than a person choosing between {bad, awful, dismal} because they have more desirable options. Bavetta & Guala (2003) argue a person choosing between two identical cans of beer, differing only terms of their bar code, does not have sufficiently diverse options for their choice to be valuable. Thus even if all choices increase freedom, there are some that maybe of modest or minimal value. Indeed, many philosophers maintain that certain choices are so trivial or meaningless as to have no value at all (Raz, 1988; Dowding, 1992).

How, then, are we to determine the significance of a choice or the quality of additional options? There are three main approaches (though these are not mutually exclusive and hybrids views are common). The first is by reference to the agent's goals and preferences. Thus, the significance of a choice is its significance to the chooser, by their own lights (Arneson, 1985). For example, Berlin (2002) suggests that the value of an option depends (in part) on its importance to the agent's "plan of life". This approach implies the quality of an option depends on the likelihood of the agent choosing it - options that they would never seriously consider are worth less than options the agent finds more attractive (Sen, 1991). On this view, the value of providing choice in community care depends on a) the significance that people place on choosing a care provider, whether they see it as a meaningful or trivial decision (Section 4.2.2 considers in more detail what this might mean); and b) their satisfaction with the range of providers they have to choose from.

The second approach is by reference to societal norms and preferences. Berlin (2002) argues that the value of a choice depends on "what value not merely the agent, but the general sentiment of the society in which he lives puts on [it]". On this view, the significance of a choice like choice of carer depends on the extent to which people in society at large, rather than just those receiving care, believe it to be significant. Similarly, Sugden (2003) argues that the quality of an option depends on the distribution of societal preferences. The choice between provider A and B has some value if at

least one comparable person would prefer A and one comparable person would prefer B. The more evenly balanced preferences are between the two options, the more valuable the choice.

The third approach is by reference to independent objective values. On this view, it is just a matter of fact that certain choices and options are significant and valuable, and others are trivial, whether or not people recognise them as such (Lloyd Thomas, 1981; Taylor, 1985). There is a potentially infinite range of views on what is objectively meaningful, so this can be cashed out in any number of idiosyncratic ways. I will not begin to try and explore all the possibilities here. However, the most common value that people refer to is autonomy.<sup>5</sup> For example, Raz (1988:246) says that the distinction between “valuable and worthless” freedoms depends on “their contribution to the ideal of personal autonomy”. I explore the implications of this claim, and the relationship between choice and autonomy in the next section.

We have established policies to increase public service choice may increase freedom. Yet the judgement as to whether this increase is substantial, minor or entirely negligible depends on both philosophical and empirical questions. First, it depends on whether, as some philosophers contend, any and every choice enhances freedom. Second, it depends on how we are to judge the quality of the choice. If it is by reference to the goals and preferences of the agent, then we need empirical evidence to understand whether users of public services judge the choice to be significant, and how satisfied they are with the diversity of their options. If it is by reference to societal attitudes and preferences, again we need empirical evidence to understand these: do people in general judge the choice to be significant, and how diverse are their preferences? In many cases, like compulsory education or general healthcare, these empirical questions will largely overlap since much of society will be service users. If we are to judge the quality of choice by reference to independent objective values, that raises the philosophical question of what these values are. As we shall see in the following section, this investigation may, in turn, generate further empirical questions.

## **4.2 Choice and autonomy**

Arguments that choice in public services has intrinsic value often emphasise the role of choice in promoting autonomy (Klein and Millar, 1995; Ben-Porath, 2009:528; Dowding and John, 2009:219; Le Grand, 2009:10–11). To understand such arguments, and to identify which choices promote autonomy, we need to

---

<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, some accounts emphasise dignity or respect as the key values at stake, but these accounts typically pass through autonomy i.e. treating people in a respectful or dignified manner entails allowing to make them autonomous choices. See section 4.2.1 below.

elucidate what is meant by autonomy. This is far from straightforward. As philosophers commonly remark, autonomy is a multi-faceted concept used rather differently by different thinkers (Feinberg, 1989; Arpaly, 2002:118; Le Grand and New, 2015:19).

For our purposes, it is helpful to distinguish four separate connotations of autonomy that I will call self-government, narrative control, authenticity and agential authority. I describe these as 'connotations' of the concept, rather than separate 'conceptions' or 'interpretations' because they are not competing or mutually exclusive, but are in fact closely linked. However, different conceptions of autonomy will emphasise different connotations, and it is possible that some conceptions may drop certain connotations entirely. Further, these are not exhaustive – autonomy has other connotations that are not relevant for us here.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4.2.1 Autonomy as Self-Government**

The first relevant connotation of autonomy is self-government: the idea individuals should have a sphere of decision-making protected from outside interference, analogous to states' rights to self-determination (Feinberg, 1989). One way of thinking about this is that autonomy is freedom from paternalism. Self-government is believed to be important because it recognises our capacity to judge what is in our own good. By contrast, intrusion into our domain of legitimate decision-making is problematic because it involves a "substitution of judgement" (Shiffrin, 2000). Some other agent (such as the government) decides we lack competence, that they are more capable than us, and so their judgement should take priority over ours (Scanlon, 1986; Klein and Millar, 1995; Brighouse, 1997; Le Grand and New, 2015). These substitutions of judgement, it is argued, fail to show adequate respect or to recognise our dignity (Goodin, 1981; Darwall, 2006).

Yet as Conly (2014) points out, there are many cases in which substitution of judgement does not seem demeaning or morally problematic. For example, if I take my car to the garage, and the mechanic replaces a faulty brake light without checking, they have done me a favour, not disrespected me. Similarly, I may be perfectly content for my surgeon to substitute their judgement for my own in deciding how best to operate on me.

I believe there are three relevant features of these cases which explain why relinquishing choice does not entail disrespect. First, they involve technical

---

<sup>6</sup> These include material independence (having the resources to get along in the world without depending on others), psychological independence (not being unduly influenced or manipulated by others), agent autonomy (psychological self-control) (Arpaly, 2002).

expertise: mechanics and doctors have access to knowledge that means they will be better decision makers than me. Second, people recognise their own lack of expertise and so are willing to delegate decisions to others. If I am knowledgeable about cars, and tell the mechanic not to change anything without consulting me, it is more plausible to cast their decision to change the brake light as a disrespectful substitution of judgement than if I know nothing about cars and have given them the *carte blanche* to do as they see fit. Third, in these cases, the judgements involved do not relate to ultimate goals or projects – they relate to means, rather than ends. By going to a doctor or mechanic, I have already signalled that I want to improve the health of myself or my car. By contrast, if the doctor decides to give me a blood transfusion even though this conflicts with my religious beliefs, they are making a more fundamental judgement by prioritising my physical health over my spiritual faith.

Pulling this together, we can outline certain conditions under which the failure to provide choice is not a demeaning substitution of judgement. To the extent that:

- technical experts are better placed to exercise their judgement than those directly affected by the decision
- those affected accept this expertise and acknowledge their own lack of the necessary skills to choose well
- the choice involves selecting the best means to an end, rather than prioritising or choosing between fundamental goals and projects

the absence of choice is less normatively problematic. Identifying the extent to which these conditions obtain in the case of public service choice, then, can help us determine extent to which those choices support autonomy.

#### **4.2.2 Autonomy as Narrative Control**

The second connotation of autonomy is what I will call 'narrative control'. This is what Christman (2017) is alluding to when he talks of being "one's own person". It is at the heart of what Brighouse (1997:504–5) means when he says that "A good life needs to be led from the inside, as it were, endorsed by the person who leads it".

Mills (1998) provides an elaborated account of autonomy as narrative control.<sup>7</sup> She argues that fundamentally, "We want a sense that we are the authors of our own lives, that our lives, if you will, are stories that we write rather than just read. We want a sense of our lives as something we do and

---

<sup>7</sup> She refers to it as 'narrative authenticity', but I have altered the label to avoid confusion with what I will refer to as 'autonomy as authenticity'

not something that merely happens to us” (Mills, 1998:163). An autonomous life is one in which the agent sees themselves as taking an active, rather than passive, role.

The desire for narrative control means that “We want to believe that the central facts of our lives – whether or not we have children, where we are educated, what career we follow, with whom we join as partners – contain in them some fundamental element of our own selection and decision” (Mills, 1998:154). This does not entail a general presumption in favour of control (as the principle of self-government above does), but more narrowly a *belief* (not necessarily the reality) that the *central facts* of our life are at least *partially* under our control.

Notice that this is a highly subjective account of autonomy. Mills is keen to emphasise the *perception* of control because she believes that these sentiments apply even in the many cases where our options are highly limited by external circumstances. She argues that choice can nevertheless be valuable because it gives us the opportunity “to endorse things as they are, to make peace with what is and what perhaps cannot be otherwise” (Mills, 1998:164). In such circumstances, choice allows us to ‘make sense’ of our lives, and to form our own narratives around them.

Equally, control only matters insofar as it relates to the ‘central facts’ of our lives. From Mills’ account, it is clear that this means only choices with what we might call ‘narrative significance’ have intrinsic value. Mills lists ‘where we are educated’ as a paradigmatic example of such a choice. However, which specific choices have narrative significance will vary substantially from person to person: which school a person attended may be pivotal point in one person’s life story, but a footnote in another’s.

The idea of autonomy as narrative control leads us to two empirical questions about choice in public services. First, to what extent does choice enhance people’s perceived control over their lives? Second, what is the narrative significance, if any, of choosing a public service? The two questions must go together: narratively significant events that we do not control can hardly contribute to our autonomy, but events we control without narrative significance are insufficiently meaningful to matter.

#### **4.2.3 Autonomy as Authenticity**

A third connotation of autonomy is the idea of authenticity (Arpaly, 2002:121–3; Bucelli, 2017; Christman, 2017).<sup>8</sup> On this view, autonomous

---

<sup>8</sup> Although some philosophers have taken pains to distinguish autonomy from authenticity (Velleman, 2005:338), the two are often run together, and I believe concern for authenticity is at least partly behind the belief that choice increases autonomy

choices are those that enable us to live our lives in accordance with our fundamental character and values, to live a life in which we are 'true to ourselves'. For example, if I am a devout Christian, attending a school that helps me to express and develop my religious identity – for example, through prayer and theological teaching – might help me live more authentically.

Specifying which characteristics and beliefs are sufficiently fundamental to matter for authenticity is an invidious task (Mele, 1995), and indeed some sceptics deny that there is such a thing as a 'true self' to be authentic to (Velleman, 2005:330–60). In general, though, we would expect a choice to have greater bearing on authenticity the more it relates to beliefs and characteristics that the chooser strongly identifies with.

However, it is also important to determine the *consequences* of the choice in terms of the chooser's ability to live according to their beliefs and character. For example, if your religious belief only requires you to attend church on Sundays, the school you attend during the week is neither here nor there. By contrast, if you have a strong cultural preference not to mix with unmarried people of the other gender, school choice is likely to be highly relevant. Thus we have two further empirical questions: i) to what extent does choice relate to beliefs and characteristics that people strongly identify with? ii) how significant are the consequences of choice for people's ability to live by these beliefs and characteristics?

In any case, notice that this account of autonomy as authenticity implies that the value of choice is instrumental, rather than intrinsic. If choice is intended to support authenticity, it is not the choice per se that is valued, but the contingent outcome. The value of choice depends on whether or not, in practice, choice aids people to live more authentic lives.

#### **4.2.4 Autonomy as Agential Authority**

A fourth connotation of autonomy refers to the agent's psychological processes and capacities – the considerations and desires that move them. Autonomy in this sense – what I will call 'agential authority' – refers to a form of self-control: the ability to reflect upon one's own motivations, decide upon a course of action and then execute it (Frankfurt, 1971; Arpaly, 2002:118–9; Bucelli, 2017). According to this notion, people can lack agential authority, and so autonomy, if they are prone to behave irrationally or impulsively, display weakness of will, or lack self-awareness.

Autonomy as agential authority focuses on internal rather than external constraints, and so does not have any direct relationship with choice. However, it has often been argued that choice has an 'educative' function, helping to develop the necessary capacities for agential authority. Choosing may help us better understand ourselves, and what we really care about (Dowding, 1992). It may also enable us to practice valuable skills such as

reasoning, deliberation and critical evaluation (Mill, 1985:123; Bavetta and Guala, 2003:428; Conly, 2017:216).

This raises the empirical question of whether public service choice does in fact generate self-knowledge. If so, we would expect preferences to shift, and values to be traded-off, over the course of deliberation. Further, it raises the question of whether this self-knowledge is pertinent only to public service choices, or whether it is relevant to other domains. We might also ask whether public service choice offers effective practice of choice – to what extent do choosers gather information and rationally deliberate? Finally, it might be objected that in modern societies apparently saturated with choice, the marginal value of one more choice is negligible. Again, this is open to empirical debate. For some, public service choice may be a learning experience as an unusually consequential choice. For others, particularly children and disadvantaged adults, meaningful choice may be the exception rather than the norm in their lives.

## **5. A framework for future research**

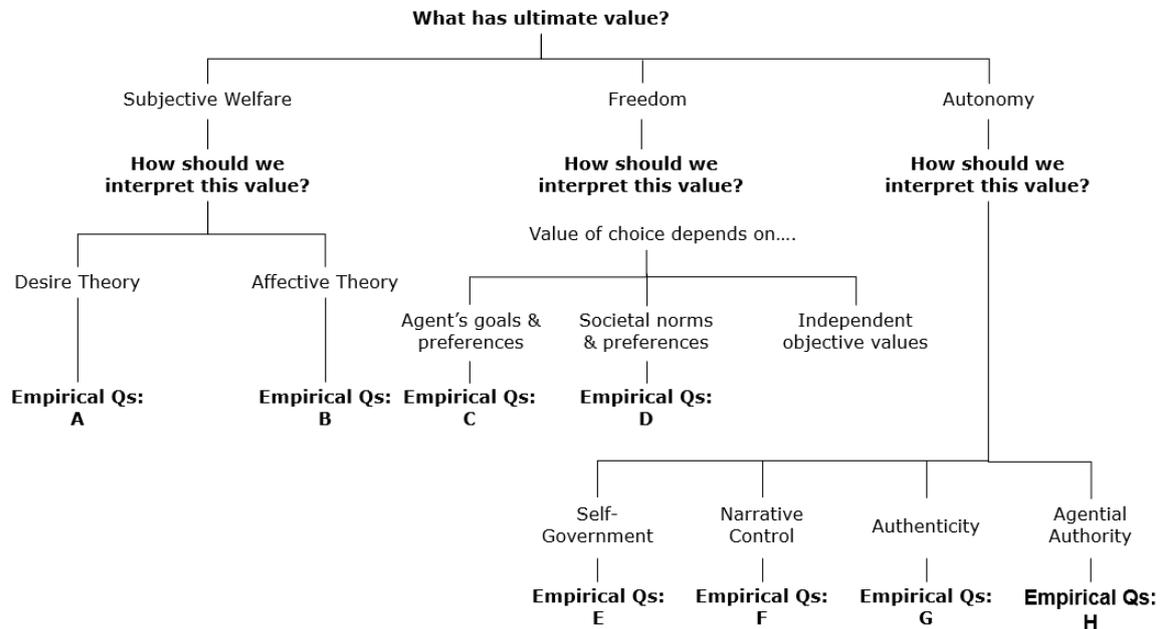
In this paper, I have covered a large philosophical terrain. In this section, I bring together the various normative questions and positions that I have reviewed, and link them to the empirical questions they entail, so as to produce a framework for future empirical research.

In seeking to understand whether choice in public services has intrinsic value or disvalue, we need to answer two types of philosophical question. The first are questions of ultimate value. Is it subjective welfare that matters, freedom, autonomy, or some combination? In practice, almost everybody believes that subjective welfare has *some* value – even non-welfarists tend to believe that welfare can be overridden by other values, not that it does not matter at all. The reverse, however, is not true – utilitarians, for example, believe that happiness is the only thing that has ultimate value, and freedom/autonomy matter only insofar as they contribute to happiness.

The second type of question relates to how we interpret these ultimate values. Is subjective welfare best construed through desire theory or an affective theory? Does choice necessarily increase freedom? Does the contribution of increased choice to freedom depend on the beliefs and preferences of the chooser, society at large, and/or independent objective values? Which connotations of autonomy best capture what is valuable about it – self-government, narrative control, authenticity or agential authority?

Throughout this paper, I have remained agnostic as to how we should answer these philosophical questions. However, different philosophical

positions give rise to different empirical questions when it comes to evaluating the intrinsic (dis)value of choice. The diagram below represents the relationships between the different theories of value and the empirical questions they give rise to. To be clear, the branches on this diagram are not mutually exclusive alternatives: there is no inconsistency in believing there are multiple valid sources of value or interpretations of that value.



### Empirical Questions A (Desire Theories)

- Do people want the ability to choose their service, independent of its consequences?
- How strong is this desire?
- Does it conflict with any other desires, and how strong are these?

### Empirical Questions B (Affective Theories)

- Does public service choice increase subjective welfare?
  - Is choosing enjoyable?
  - Do choosers feel empowered or controlled?
- Does public service choice decrease subjective welfare?
  - Does choosing have substantial opportunity costs in terms of time, energy or mental resources?
  - Does it involve trade-offs producing mental conflict?
  - Is choice pressurised?
  - Does choice generate (the anticipation of) regret?
  - Does choice unrealistically raise expectations or improve experiences of outcomes?

### Empirical Questions C (Freedom judged by Agent)

- Is public service choice felt by choosers to be significant?
- Do choosers feel they have an adequate range of options?

### **Empirical Questions D (Freedom judged by Society)**

- Do people in general believe public service choice to be significant?
- How far do choosers vary in terms of their preference of service providers?

### **Empirical Questions E (Autonomy as Self-Government)**

- How confident are people in their judgement regarding public services? Are they willing to defer to experts?
- Is this a choice regarding means or ends?

### **Empirical Questions F (Autonomy as Narrative Control)**

- Do people perceive greater control over their lives as a result of public service choice?
- What is its 'narrative significance' to their lives?

### **Empirical Questions G (Autonomy as Authenticity)**

- Does public service choice relate to beliefs or characteristics that people strongly identify with?
- Would the absence of this choice significantly undermine their ability to live in accordance with these beliefs or characteristics?

### **Empirical Questions H (Autonomy as Agential Authority)**

- Does public service choice offer effective practice of choosing, that develops self-knowledge and rational capacities, in a way that is not replicated elsewhere?

The framework I have produced can help us determine whether choice in public services has intrinsic (dis)value, and what kind of value it has. Without assuming any fundamental normative commitment – to subjective welfare, freedom or autonomy – it identifies different philosophical positions that could be taken, and the empirical questions they entail.

This leaves a further normative question unaddressed: how we should weight these different types of value. For example, choice in a public service may increase (certain types of) autonomy but reduce (certain types of) welfare. Or choice in a public service may have intrinsic but not instrumental value (or vice versa). I will not say anything here about how we might trade these values off to reach our final evaluation of choice policies. While arguments certainly can and are made about whether freedom or autonomy should trump welfare, or what the appropriate 'exchange rate' is between them, for many people this is likely to be a somewhat idiosyncratic process that is difficult to fully articulate and justify. What I hope to have provided with this framework is some clarity and guidance as to how to make that judgement.

## 6. Conclusion

Policies to increase choice in public services remain the subject of political and academic debate. Yet this debate has thus far been too narrow, focusing too heavily on the consequences of choice and neglecting its potential intrinsic value or disvalue. I have suggested that this may be in part because researchers are unsure how to discuss the intrinsic costs and benefits of choice beyond simply asserting that choice is intrinsically good. In this paper, I have attempted to clarify the philosophical issues at stake: whether expanding choice in public services is good or bad will likely depend on our theory of value: how we conceive of subjective welfare, freedom and autonomy, and how valuable we think they are.

I have also argued that the intrinsic value or disvalue of choice is amenable to empirical investigation. Different theories of value imply we should be looking for different things in determining how positive or negative choice in public services is. The framework I have developed here describes these relationships, and produces a set of empirical questions that should be a starting point for future research. In my own research, I am using this framework to compare secondary school choice policies in England and Scotland in terms of the intrinsic value or disvalue they produce, by interviewing and surveying families choosing schools in both countries on the desirability, emotional impact and significance of choice. However, the questions raised in this paper are equally relevant to other services (healthcare, social care, housing, transport, utilities) and other countries, possibly using other methods. More evidence on these should lead to a more rounded and informed debate on choice in public services.

## References

- 6, P. (2003) 'Giving Consumers of British Public Services More Choice: What can be Learned from Recent History?' *Journal of Social Policy*, 32(2) pp. 239–270.
- Arneson, R. J. (1985) 'Freedom and Desire.' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 15(3) pp. 425–448.
- Arpaly, N. (2002) *Unprincipled virtue an inquiry into moral agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ball, S. J. and Gewirtz, S. (1997) 'Girls in the Education Market: Choice, competition and complexity.' *Gender and Education*, 9(2) pp. 207–222.

- Barnes, M. and Prior, D. (1995) 'Spoilt for choice? How consumerism can disempower public service users.' *Public Money & Management*, 15(3) pp. 53–58.
- Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M. and Tice, D. M. (1998) 'Ego Depletion: Is the Active Self a Limited Resource?' Diener, E. (editor) (ed.) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(5) pp. 1252–1265.
- Bavetta, S. and Guala, F. (2003) 'Autonomy-Freedom and Deliberation.' *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 15(4) pp. 423–443.
- Ben-Porath, S. R. (2009) 'School Choice as a Bounded Ideal.' *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43(4) pp. 527–544.
- Berlin, I. (2002) 'Two Concepts of Liberty.' In Harris, I. and Hardy, H. (eds) *Liberty: incorporating Four essays on liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blomqvist, P. (2004) 'The Choice Revolution: Privatization of Swedish Welfare Services in the 1990s.' *Social Policy & Administration*, 38(2) pp. 139–155.
- Botti, S. and Iyengar, S. (2006) 'The Dark Side of Choice: When Choice Impairs Social Welfare.' *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 25(1) pp. 24–38.
- Bradley, B. (2006) 'Two Concepts of Intrinsic Value.' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 9(2) pp. 111–130.
- Brandt, R. B. (1979) *A theory of the good and the right*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Brighouse, H. (1997) 'Two Philosophical Errors Concerning School Choice.' *Oxford Review of Education*, 23(4) pp. 503–510.
- Bucelli, I. (2017) 'Free Schools and the "intrinsic value" of choice: a conceptual framework to understand the notion of autonomy in education policy.' *Unpublished Manuscript*.
- Carter, I. (1999) *A measure of freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carter, I. (2004) 'Choice, freedom, and freedom of choice.' *Social Choice and Welfare*, 22(1) pp. 61–81.
- Chernev, A., Böckenholt, U. and Goodman, J. (2015) 'Choice overload: A conceptual review and meta-analysis.' *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(2) pp. 333–358.

- Christman, J. (2017) 'Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy.' In Zalta, E. N. (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Winter 2017, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Conly, S. (2014) *Against autonomy: justifying coercive paternalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Conly, S. (2017) 'Paternalism, coercion and the unimportance of (some) liberties.' *Behavioural Public Policy*, 1(2) pp. 207–218.
- Crisp, R. (2017) 'Well-Being.' In Zalta, E. N. (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Fall 2017, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Darwall, S. (2006) 'The Value of Autonomy and Autonomy of the Will.' *Ethics*, 116(2) pp. 263–284.
- Deci, E. L. and Ryan, R. M. (2015) 'Self-Determination Theory.' In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. 2nd edition, Elsevier.
- Dowding, K. (1992) 'Choice: Its Increase and its Value.' *British Journal of Political Science*, 22(3) pp. 301–314.
- Dowding, K. and John, P. (2009) 'The Value of Choice in Public Policy.' *Public Administration*, 87(2) pp. 219–233.
- Dworkin, G. (1982) 'Is More Choice Better than Less?' *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, 7(1) pp. 47–61.
- Feinberg, J. (1989) 'Autonomy.' In *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 27–53.
- Frankfurt, H. G. (1971) 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.' *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68(1) pp. 5–20.
- Gintis, H. (1995) 'The political economy of school choice.' *Teachers College Record*, 96.
- Goodin, R. E. (1981) 'The political theories of choice and dignity.' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 18(2) pp. 91–100.
- Goodwin, M. (2009) 'Choice in Public Services: Crying "Wolf" in the School Choice Debate.' *Political Quarterly*, 80(2) pp. 270–281.
- Hargreaves, D. H. (1996a) 'A Reply to Walford.' *Oxford Review of Education*, 22(2) pp. 155–157.

- Hargreaves, D. H. (1996b) 'Diversity and Choice in School Education: a modified libertarian approach.' *Oxford Review of Education*, 22(2) pp. 131–141.
- Haybron, D. (2011) 'Happiness.' *In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Fall 2011.
- Heathwood, C. (2015) 'Desire-fulfillment theory.' *In The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*. New York: Routledge, pp. 135–47.
- Hurka, T. (1987) 'Why Value Autonomy?' Hurka, T. (ed.) *Social Theory and Practice*, 13(3) pp. 361–361.
- Klein, R. and Millar, J. (1995) 'Do-it-Yourself Social Policy: Searching for a new Paradigm?' Klein, R. (ed.) *Social Policy and Administration*, 29(4) pp. 303–316.
- Le Grand, J. (2009) *The Other Invisible Hand: Delivering Public Services through Choice and Competition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Le Grand, J. and New, B. (2015) *Government Paternalism: nanny state or helpful friend?* Princeton.
- Lind, M., Visentini, M., Mäntylä, T. and Del Missier, F. (2017) 'Choice-Supportive Misremembering: A New Taxonomy and Review.' *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8 p. 2062.
- Lloyd Thomas, D. A. (1981) 'Liberty, Equality, Property.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 55 pp. 177–292.
- McAteer, M. (2005) 'The government's choice agenda.' *Consumer Policy Review*, 15(3) pp. 79–84.
- Mele, A. R. (1995) *Autonomous Agents: from self-control to autonomy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mill, J. S. (1985) *On Liberty*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Mills, C. (1998) 'Choice and Circumstance.' *Ethics*, 109(1) pp. 154–165.
- Moller, A., Ryan, R. and Deci, E. (2006) 'Self-Determination Theory and Public Policy: Improving the Quality of Consumer Decisions Without Using Coercion.' *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 25(1) pp. 104–116.
- Musset, P. (2012) *School choice and equity: current policies in OECD countries and a literature review*. OECD Publishing.

- Norman, R. (1981) 'Liberty, Equality, Property.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 55 pp. 103–209.
- Pattanaik, P. K. and Xu, Y. (1990) 'On Ranking Opportunity Sets in Terms of Freedom of Choice.' *Recherches Économiques de Louvain / Louvain Economic Review*, 56(3/4) pp. 383–390.
- Raz, J. (1988) *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Scanlon, T. (1986) 'The significance of choice.' *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 7 pp. 149–216.
- Schwartz, B. (2005) *The Paradox of Choice: why more is less*. First Ecco paperback edition, New York: HarperCollins.
- Schwartz, B. (2009) 'Incentives, choice, education and well-being.' *Oxford Review of Education*, 35(3) pp. 391–403.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1975) *Helplessness: on depression, development, and death*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.
- Sen, A. (1990) 'Welfare, Freedom and Social Choice: a Reply.' *Recherches Économiques de Louvain / Louvain Economic Review*, 56(3/4) pp. 451–485.
- Sen, A. (1991) 'Welfare, preference and freedom.' *Journal of Econometrics*, 50(1) pp. 15–29.
- Shiffrin, S. V. (2000) 'Paternalism, Unconscionability Doctrine, and Accommodation.' *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 29(3) pp. 205–250.
- Sugden, R. (2003) 'Opportunity as a Space for Individuality: Its Value and the Impossibility of Measuring It.' *Ethics*, 113(4) pp. 783–809.
- Taylor, C. (1985) 'What's wrong with negative liberty?' *In Philosophy and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 211–29.
- Tummers, L., Jilke, S. and Van de Walle, S. (2013) *Citizens in Charge? Reviewing the Background and Value of Introducing Choice and Competition in Public Services*. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.
- Velleman, J. D. (2005) *Self to Self: Selected Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.