The Paradox of Choice and the Death of God

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Although some choice is undoubtedly better than none, more is not always better than less. – Barry Schwartz

God is dead...how shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?–Friedrich Nietzsche

My least favorite aisle in the grocery store is the cereal aisle. It’s not because I don’t love cereal (I do); it’s because there are too many choices. I know that I probably ought to eat one of the hundreds of low sugar, high fiber cereals—perhaps one of the many kinds of oatmeal. But the hundreds of different chocolate cereals are so damn good. At least for a time. Then I get tired of the sweet stuff and wish that I bought something else. The problem is that I take too much time deciding, and, in the end, I am usually disappointed with choose.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz describes some research that suggests that having too many choices—like I have in the cereal aisle—is actually bad for one’s well-being. His claim is that we feel less satisfied with the choices that we make because we are haunted by the idea that one of the many other options that we did not choose may have been better. Although we tend to think that the more choice we have the better, Schwartz is convincing in arguing that the abundance of choice, even in trivial domains like the grocery store, can make us less happy (he calls this the paradox of choice).

The problem seems to be much more pronounced when we think about the choices related to important existential questions in our lives. Choices about what school we ought to go to, what career path we ought to take, where we ought to live, whom we ought to date or marry, whether and when we ought to have children, etc., can be extremely difficult. To spend a lot of time thinking about these questions is to acknowledge that a lot is at stake; the idea that the chosen career path or mate was the wrong choice is enough to cause us serious psychological harm.
But were these existential choices ever easy? It seems as though people have long been faced with important choices about where to work or whom to marry. There are good reasons, however, to think that the nature of the choices that we face today is different because there really are so many more options available to us. This is not just an empirical claim about the number of potential careers or mates in the world (although it is probably true that there are more possible careers and mates); rather, it’s a claim about a worldview that has slowly pervaded our culture. This new worldview, the philosophical foundation of which arguably began with Nietzsche’s claim that “God is dead,” seems to be one in which old models for living are being erased or left behind. For example, getting married used to be a thing that you did as soon as you could; the same with having children. It didn’t even seem like a choice. Everyone just did it. Schwartz writes:

A range of life choices has been available to Americans for quite some time. But in the past, the “default” options were so powerful and dominant that few perceived themselves to be making choices. Whom we married was a matter of choice, but we knew that we would do it as soon as we could and have children, because that was something all people did. The anomalous few who departed from this pattern were seen as social renegades, subjects of gossip and speculation.

Today it is hardly the case that those who don’t have children are renegades. Many people make a deliberate choice to not have children. But the problem that comes along with shaking the old existential models—e.g., grow up, get a job, get married, have a child (or several)—is that there aren’t corresponding replacement models for existential decisions; instead, we are faced with a myriad of ways to live our lives, and, prima facie, many of these ways seem equally good (notice that is not to say that some aren’t bad...). If this analysis is accurate, then it seems as though we are faced with the same dilemma that I faced in the cereal aisle: knowing that there were other options available to us
makes the option we chose less satisfying. Perhaps it would have been better to have children, or to be a teacher rather than researcher, one might reason. If we have destroyed the old existential models (perhaps for good reason), then how are we supposed to live? Or, equivalently, if God really is dead, then how shall we “murderers of all murderers,” comfort ourselves?