



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

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## **Beware Grand Inquisitors and Psychology Professors** **by Sheldon Richman**

For some people, there are a limitless number of reasons individual freedom is not the great good libertarians believe it to be. The “in” reason at the moment is that freedom to choose among a large number of options makes people unhappy. The leading theoretician among the choice-is-bad set is Barry Schwartz, professor of psychology at Swarthmore College and author of *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. He is also the author of *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life*. You get his drift.

Schwartz sums up his outlook this way: “For many people, increased choice can lead to a decrease in satisfaction. Too many options can result in paralysis, not liberation.” For this reason, he is unimpressed by arguments that cutting back government programs is a good thing because it will give people more choices. As he puts it,

Do we care about objective results or subjective results when we’re out to improve the general well-being? I think that once people’s standard of living is above subsistence levels, it is usually the subjective quality of the experience that really matters. And increased choice does not seem to improve the subjective quality of experience.

Schwartz applies this principle to every issue in which people call for less government involvement: Social Security, education, health care, and more. He wrote in the *New York Times* recently,

Whether people are choosing jam in a grocery store or essay topics in a college class, the more options people have, the less likely they are to make a choice.

He’s got disciples too. *The Washington Post’s* Sebastian Mallaby has taken up the cause. He writes in “Trouble with Choices,”

There's a limit to how many choices each of us has time to make, and most people in the rich world are pretty much maxed out already.... It follows that pro-market, government-cutting schemes cannot be justified by a presumed moral superiority.

There is much to be said against this thesis. First, if choice really makes us unhappy, why do so many of us stop patronizing mom-and-pop stores with limited inventories and rush to Wal-Mart and Best Buy the moment we get the chance? The opponents of freedom really must get their stories straight. They decry the little retail shops' being driven out of business when the "big box" stores open nearby. But here's Schwartz telling us lots of choices make us unhappy. Which is it?

Moreover, people have figured out that they have ways to manage a bewildering number of choices. *Consumer Reports* magazine is one method. A recommendation from a friend is another. Then there's the Internet.

But there's a more fundamental objection to Schwartz's argument. The amount of choice we have should be none of the government's business. Government doesn't give us choices. It either interferes with free choice or it stays out of the way. To speak, as Schwartz does, of government's "throwing an ever-greater menu of options at the American people" is to assume what needs to be demonstrated: that government should have the power to constrict peaceful activities in the first place. Government can expand our choices only if it has previously limited them by physical force. By what justification?

Choice in the marketplace grows out of individual freedom. I want shoes. Anyone is free to sell me shoes. That presents me with choices, requiring me to pay attention and to discriminate. What's the alternative? Government control. Where's the evidence that that makes people happy?

Notice the rather large premise that Schwartz tries to smuggle past us: government programs shouldn't be changed if the resulting choice — that is, self-responsibility — would increase unhappiness or stress. Here's my counterargument: *So what?*

### **Freedom and responsibility**

Government's job is not to make people happy or even to protect them from being unhappy. It is not to save them from stress, bewilderment, or self-responsibility — as if it could actually do those things. Whenever it tries, however, it turns adults into children.

In other words, Schwartz's case is built on a non sequitur. Even if it is true that self-responsibility makes people unhappy, that "truth" cannot be an argument against government retrenchment. Schwartz's empirical studies allegedly showing that people buy less chocolate and jam (but presumably not fewer psychology books) as the varieties increase is so much academic hot air when it comes to public policy.

One might construct a case that free people are more likely to commit suicide than enslaved people. If you are free, you realize that you are largely responsible for your own success

or failure in life. People who fail to live up to their expectations may be more prone to blame themselves and, in their unhappiness, to end their lives. Slaves may never blame themselves for their unhappiness.

Would that be a good reason to abolish or limit freedom?

Schwartz is hardly the first to argue that freedom makes men unhappy and that they therefore prefer slavery. Fyodor Dostoyevsky disparages the claim in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In chapter 5, “The Grand Inquisitor,” Ivan Karamazov tells the story of Jesus’ return during the Spanish Inquisition, “when fires were lighted every day to the glory of God, and ‘in the splendid auto da fé the wicked heretics were burnt.’” When the Grand Inquisitor sees that Jesus’ presence threatens the status quo, he has him arrested. He tells Jesus,

But let me tell Thee that now, today, people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet....

[For] the first time it has become possible to think of the happiness of men. Man was created a rebel; and how can rebels be happy?... Thou didst reject the only way by which men might be made happy. But, fortunately, departing Thou didst hand on the work to us. Thou hast promised, Thou hast established by Thy word, Thou hast given to us the right to bind and to unbind, and now, of course, Thou canst not think of taking it away. Why, then, hast Thou come to hinder us?

Scoffing that 15 centuries earlier Jesus had refused to enslave people by making them dependent on him for their bread, the Grand Inquisitor continues,

Oh, never, never can they feed themselves without us! No science will give them bread so long as they remain free. In the end they will lay their freedom at our feet, and say to us, “Make us your slaves, but feed us.”...

... They will marvel at us and look on us as gods, because we are ready to endure the freedom which they have found so dreadful and to rule over them — so awful it will seem to them to be free. But we shall tell them that we are Thy servants and rule them in Thy name....

... I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater fear than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which he is born. But only one who can appease his conscience can take over his freedom.

The Grand Inquisitor nevertheless sees Jesus as a threat to his power:

For the secret of man's being is not only to live but to have something to live for. Without a stable conception of the object of life, man would not consent to go on living, and would rather destroy himself than remain on earth, though he had bread in abundance.

Yet, he asks,

Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering....

But didst Thou not know that he would at last reject even Thy image and Thy truth, if he is weighed down with the fearful burden of free choice?...

... Too, too well will they know the value of complete submission! And until men know that, they will be unhappy....

... We shall show them that they are weak, that they are only pitiful children, but that childlike happiness is the sweetest of all. They will become timid and will look to us and huddle close to us in fear, as chicks to the hen. They will marvel at us and will be awestricken before us, and will be proud at our being so powerful and clever that we have been able to subdue such a turbulent flock of thousands of millions. They will tremble impotently before our wrath, their minds will grow fearful, they will be quick to shed tears like women and children, but they will be just as ready at a sign from us to pass to laughter and rejoicing, to happy mirth and childish song. Yes, we shall set them to work, but in their leisure hours we shall make their life like a child's game, with children's songs and innocent dance.

Undoubtedly, freedom is scary, because with it comes responsibility. Would-be "leaders" know and exploit that fact. The line between childhood and adulthood is the joyous willingness to face one's fears and accept responsibility — in the knowledge that only then can one enjoy the full fruits of freedom and autonomy. Grown-ups should have no need for Grand Inquisitors or professors of psychology.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine.*

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