

IS FREE CHOICE REALLY FREE?



Am I in charge of my life? In control of the decisions I make? selecting options based on my right to Free Choice? Am I really Free to make the Choices I want? If you were to advise that I select options that you suggest, I am sure to be incensed like many of us. I like Choice and to be the master of that Choice.

It is often in moments of solitude and in moments when options to use time are limited, that I tend to muse on topics that are otherwise beyond my usual realm. It was on that flight, this question first posed itself to me. Perhaps it was my frustration at not being able to afford a top end airline which had business class seats or perhaps it was my unfulfilled desire to be more fit and healthy, so that I can weather the travails of frequent travel. That night, I was flying on a low cost Airline on the long journey back home and had an irritable throat. A warm drink, I decide, will make me comfortable. I summoned the services of the Airline Steward. He offered me a few options. Tea, Masala Tea, Cappuccino or a Latte. I wanted a sugar Free Americano. He tells me that sugar free Americano is not available but offers me alternatives. Coffee which is not premixed with sugar and I could have a Cappuccino or a Latte. He also added that the Tea they serve on board is a premium brand. I make an informed Choice. I decide to go ahead with the Cappuccino. The Free Choice question was still lingering in the air. Over the aroma of the simmering Cappuccino. So, was I exercising my Free Choice?

Is there really Free Choice? Are we making Choices of our own accord? Have we ever done so in our lives? Cut back to a few decades. The days when I was deciding on which career to pursue. My parents and significant others advised me on my choice of a career. Although my father was an Engineer or may be because he was

one, he did not think engineering was a good choice for me. He dissuaded me from following that line. In our family many are medical professionals, and generally everyone else kept, in not so subtle ways, indicating to me that I should also do the same. Alas! my scores weren't stellar. So colleges in India or in the cities my family preferred were not accessible with that score. We did not have enough financial muscle to afford an overseas educational program, so that was not a practical option either. My academic performance was average so entry into premier institutions, for other programs was not possible. Finally I settled for a course, that was fairly new, at that time. MicroBiology. I remember even today I was happy with the choice I made. Even proud.

Decades later, today I am an Organisation Development practitioner. No relation, whatsoever, to what I started off with, as a career choice! Free Choice? Influenced Free Choice? Circumstance driven reality? Or a random series of events?

It seemed to me that more than exercising Free Choice, at that time I was exercising my Choice from a limited set of options. It was not Free Choice, but an illusion of Choice.

Some researchers say that the illusion of Choice is a psychological mental model that states humans are happy if they believe that have control over their own actions and can exercise Free Choice. If Free Choice is deprived, or seemingly deprived, from an individual, he or she will become resentful or rebellious, even if the choice forced upon him/her is identical to the one he/she would have selected of his/her own accord. Somehow this phenomena plays out in many complex ways and we end being so comfortable with this illusion of choice that we often mistake it for real Free Choice.

This illusion of choice sometimes, stems from our natural biology, sometimes it is psychological, sometimes it is economics and at other times sociological.

The other day I went to a famous eyewear chain to purchase Sunglasses for a family member. Over the years the little economics I know has taught me that free market competition, market regulations and demand supply has an impact on prices. With increased number of players in the market, one can expect prices to stabilise or climb down. I was surprised as I browsed the Sunglasses section that the prices of Sunglass brands have skyrocketed! Those little assemblies of glass, metal, and plastic that cost probably a few hundreds to make, sell at a few tens of thousands! Some of the more fancy ones can rival the price of a budget car!

The answer is basic market dominance. Most frames are manufactured by a single company, named Luxottica. The Italian company makes frames and sunglasses for an amazing list of brands and stores, including; Prada ,Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, Burberry, Ralph Lauren, Tiffany, Bvlgari, DKNY, Target Optical, RayBan &

also makes Google Glass & many more. Luxottica controls 80% of the major brands in the \$28 billion global eyewear industry. It also controls the retail chains that sell the brands and in some countries the insurance companies that cover the eye health plans!

I had been offered many choices. But all the choices were from the same company that owned all these brands. So much for buying eyewear for a better perspective. Everything seemed to be a carefully concocted optical illusion!

If we thought choice was an illusion only in eyewear, we are grossly mistaken.

Take the beer industry. AB Inbev controls more than 50% of all beer brands sold in the world. It came about after the merger of two huge beer brewing companies – Anheuser-Busch and InBev. Together they produce and distribute over 200 types of beer. Take the IT industry. Microsoft has a near monopoly on all desktop operating systems. Alphabet – the company that owns Google, has a similar monopoly on all online search. Mondelez owns a sizable share of the snacks we consume everyday. Even the zippers we commonly find on our apparels are not Free from this lack of Choice. Look carefully at almost any piece of clothing with a zip attached to it and there's a good chance you'll see three subtly stamped letters YKK. YKK the Japanese zipper behemoth, makes roughly half of all the zippers on earth. More than 7 billion zippers each year.

Amazon & its subsidiaries, DeBeers, OPEC, Intel, Pearson etc. etc. pervade our personal and professional lives and we don't even realise that all our Free! decisions as a consumer, are often not so Free after all.

So what is Free Choice?

Free Choice is the idea that we are able to have some choice in how we act and assumes that we are free to choose our behaviour, in other words we are self-determined. Free Choice is the ability to choose between different possible courses of action, *unimpeded*.

Now the twist to the Free Choice story. It seems all our choices are *impeded*. According to Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahnemann, our choice is determined by 2 systems in our mind – one conscious and the other automatic. System 1 is automatic and impulsive. System 1 is a remnant from our past, and it's crucial to our survival. Not having to think before jumping away from a car when it honks at us is quite useful, isn't it?

System 2 is very conscious, aware and considerate. It helps us exert self-control and deliberately focus our attention. This system is at work when we are meeting a

friend and trying to spot them in a huge crowd of people, as it helps us recall how they look and filter out all these other people.

However, these 2 systems don't just perfectly alternate or work together. They often fight over who's in charge and this conflict determines how you act and behave. Our brain is lazy and causes us to make intellectual errors. When system 1 faces a tough problem it can't solve, it'll call system 2 into action to work out the details. But sometimes our brain perceives problems as simpler as they actually are. System 1 thinks it can handle it, even though it actually can't, and you end up making a mistake. We call these errors generically as Cognitive Biases. Cognitive Biases inform our Free Choice like nothing else does. And it does so, so delicately, that we are not even aware of it.

Reminds me of a story economist Benjamin Graham wrote in his autobiography. He said that even though he lived in a \$12,000-a-month (in the 1930's!) townhouse in New York, had a personal masseuse, and lived extremely well, he would sometimes walk instead of take the subway in order to save a nickel or two on tolls. He would feel guilty if he spent the money. Graham speculated that this personality quirk – guilt over small expenditures that don't seem important – was a common psychological manifestation that stuck with those who had built their own fortune. The joy for a successful self-made man or woman came from the understanding that he could still control his money and that his money wasn't controlling him. He wasn't, in other words, a slave to luxury. This is the illusion of Choice.

Today Neuroscience research informs us that, the feeling of wanting to do something that we experience is always real, but there may be no connection between the feeling and actually doing it. New studies, that build on work by psychologists Dan Wegner and Thalia Wheatley, say that the brain rewrites history when it makes its Choices, changing our memories so that we believe we wanted to do something before it happened.

Researcher Andrea Lavazza writing on Neuroscience, published in the journal Psychological Science, on Free Choice states that research seem to show that our simple actions (and therefore, potentially, also more complex ones) are triggered by unconscious neural activity and that the awareness of those actions only occurs at a later time, when we think we are willing to act. As proposed by psychologists Wegner and Aarts, we are “built” to have the impression to consciously control our actions or to have the power to freely choose, even though all that is only a cognitive illusion. Our decision-making draws upon a rich history of accumulated information, manifested in preferences, attitudes and motivations, and is related to the current internal and external environment in which we act. Complete absence of context is impossible in exercising our Free Choice.

Finally it is perhaps best to remember Ayn Rands famous words On Free Choice... It's true that there's no such thing as Free Choice. We can't help what we are or what we do. It's not our fault. Nobody's to blame for anything. It's all in our background ... and our glands. If we are good, that's no achievement of ours — we were lucky in our glands. If we are rotten, nobody should punish us — we were unlucky, that's all.

In a world, in these times, when we are quick to judge others, criticise, ridicule, persecute...even kill based on choices people are making...it may be worthwhile to pause and understand the complexity of choices. The inevitability of some choices. The helplessness behind many choices. Ours and theirs. Mine and yours.

Our beliefs about Free Choice are perhaps our biggest Free Choice, because we believe that we have a modicum of Free Choice to exercise in that decision. Could even this be an illusion? Did this question on Free Choice pose itself, is it from the circumstances prevailing or was it purely random?

(All views expressed here are the views of the essayist and does not represent the official standpoints of any organisation the essayist is associated with)