Choice: More Than Wanting to Have Your Cake and Eat It Too

Choice is everywhere. It profoundly affects our lives. Compared to our ancestors—even those of just a century ago—we have more things to choose and manage. Therefore it is no surprise to declare that the presence of choice and its resulting complexities of decision making constitute a central part of our lives.

But this book is about far more than that. My claim is that the relatively newfound presence of choice in the developed world is a force that has penetrated not only our lives, but also our lifestyles and our culture. In short, choice has transformed not only how we live but also *how we think* and who we are. It is the influence of choice that has recently—since about 1970, if we had to pick a single year—separated us from who we used to be.

The startling revelation about choice is that its presence in our lives manifests itself in a fantastic variety of intellectual and cultural contributions. But rather than simply muse in wonderment about all of the marvelous things out there and the joys and anguishes we experience in having to pick and choose among them, we will sample an abundant cross section of modern creative expression and demonstrate the impact that the era of choice—which began roughly a century ago—has had. Choice has influenced specific scientific and philosophical theories and in addition has helped bring about movements, the most notable of these being postmodernism, which for many thinkers has become our defining cultural mode. In addition to surveying the altered cultural landscape, we will also examine choice at the individual level with both its personal and sociological implications. Finally, we will consider examples of how thinking through the oppositions that choices present to us can guide policy decisions in business and government.

What is "choice"? In ordinary speech we talk about having choices, alternatives, or options. We also speak of actions: having to make a choice (which seems to imply a burden), and making a decision (with its air of finality). There

is certainly a difference between the potential states and the decisive state. As we are often painfully reminded, it is one thing to be gratuitously awash with choices, and quite another to pick one. Since each of these decision-making aspects influences themes that we will consider, I want to define "choice" as referring both to environments in which choices abound, and to the ramifications of having to act decisively. Obviously, the gravity (or lack of it) of any situation is related to the stresses we create. But even in the happiest of circumstances, when impelled, and not compelled, to choose, we generate some anxiety in building up to the moment of action, the instant in which the decision is executed. A linguistic aside: here, "executed" is consistent with psychiatrist Irvin Yalom's observation that to *de-cide* means to kill; that is, in making a decision, we understand that the excluded candidates are no longer "alive" for us. In fact, the Random House dictionary gives "to cut off" as the etymology for "decide"; semantically, this corresponds with one's finally acting, cutting off the process itself as well as the unchosen alternatives.

As we will discuss, the overplentiful commodification cultivated since the maturation of the Industrial Revolution has been an integral theme, an inescapable core of our lives, for more than a generation now. This cornucopia is wonderful, yet dreadful. We are literally spoiled for choice, but even those cheerful situations in which we are like a kid in a candy shop can turn momentous. In our delight at picking the prize, we confront the regret of lost opportunities. Of course, the degree of regret depends on the situation's importance and on our assessment of its risks. But as our wants become needs, we magnify even trivial decisions and heap ostensibly unwarranted attention and analysis on them.

The fact is, every situation is unique and can never be revisited. Consider a dining experience. You are at the restaurant (one of many you could have visited). It is a unique event (whether a regular Wednesday night out with friends or a first date or an anniversary); you are contemplating the wine list (which may never again be the same). You can either invest yourself in the decision process, or you can divest—opt out, if you will—in a number of ways, including the nondecision of leaving it up to someone else. To put it differently, you can be active or passive, involve yourself or not, live life or let someone (or something) else manage it for you. This leads right to the heart of what existentialist thought is about, and we will trace that path later on.

But back to the wine list. If you thoroughly engage yourself in the decision process, you must consider many variables: price, taste preferences, familiar-

ity, reputation, complementarity with various foods, and-more superficial but nevertheless key—concerns like nationality, region, vineyard, and vogue. Your information is incomplete, the wine list, in its limitations, may weigh on you with omissions, and you can't think about this all night. Finally, you are not alone—you are responsible for others' enjoyment as well.

This all sounds tense, analytical, and obsessive. Just pick a wine—but that is opting out, disengaging. So you take the plunge and think it over.

To put this into perspective, the wine will come, it will probably be suitable, because most wine would be, and since you are still reading this, your diligence and taste are no doubt of a high standard. You'll never quite know how the other wines would have worked out, but, stepping back a bit more, we're only talking about some wine with dinner.

But so many—most?—decisions are complex ones. If you aren't fazed by the wine example, try an experiment. Invite several friends over to watch a movie. Tell them that you'll all decide on a choice once everyone has arrived. What will probably occur is a fumbling, hesitant blend of conflict and cooperation. Most of those present will attempt to be reasonable and at least mildly accommodating, thereby curbing their enthusiasm for certain picks and softening their veto positions for other ones. Anyone with strong preferences and a personality to match would be taking a chance in attempting to force the issue—there is more at stake than merely choosing a film. We try to maintain the appearance, at least, of cooperation, reasonability, and kindness. We also wish to minimize the wrath and criticism engendered by being responsible for a disliked choice or for vetoing something favorable to others.

The inevitable fact, however, is that we have dissimilar preferences and this creates conflict. The movie situation provides only tame drama (it is hardly World War III: The Sequel). But it is significant that after some initial statements and a bit of jousting, one or two of your friends will withdraw ("anything except horror movies," or "just no musicals") because the discomfort of the process outweighs any mild disappointment from a lesser-preferred pick. This discomfort has been well expressed by the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard: "When I behold my possibilities I experience that dread which is the 'dizziness of freedom' and my choice is made in fear and trembling." Perhaps Kierkegaard had no friends come around to socialize, but the fact remains that many of us admit being terrible at decisions.

It is clear that any choice we make involves contemplating the inclusion of certain things and the exclusion of others. Once a decision has taken place and is finalized, the uniqueness of the situation makes it irrevocable. In addition, the time constraint that we face underscores the competition among the various alternatives. These points taken together put pressure on us and create discomfort and anxiety that outlive the decision process itself. When the decisions are important and lasting ones, we tend to revisit them—frequently unsatisfied.

Obviously, people have always had choices to make over the course of human existence. And our forebears realized that choice could be burdensome. The novelist Bruce Chatwin tells us, for example, of the Sufi proverb, "'Freedom is absence of choice." However, until recently, most ordinary lives passed without constantly being under the siege of having to choose. The vast majority of people's time and effort was devoted to essential tasks. Discretionary worth, if it existed at all, was scant and occasional. Increasingly though, during the past several decades we have witnessed a spectacular rise in the production and delivery of goods and services. This has changed, and indeed defined, what life has to offer for many of us. An ethos of plenty for the many first emerged full-blown in the United States in the 1950s, gradually spreading to Europe and later other parts of the globe. As enjoyable and liberating as this horn of plenty is, its very presence for us, as opposed to its relative absence for our ancestors, creates a paradoxical situation in which we are more painfully aware of our limitations now than we ever were. Further, even when swamped with potential choices, we are forced to consider their negation—what we pass up. As if this weren't enough, the time, effort, and stress of the decision process tends to exhaust our limited emotional capital and can significantly diminish the utility we derive from the outcome. Even worse, we are often conditioned to expect a choice and are then denied the opportunity.

Making a choice and actually carrying out the decision creates winners and losers, inclusion and exclusion. It entails commitment, where we lose our chance to choose. And it forces us to say yes and no, it causes us to compare, to consider differences and to form oppositions. These oppositions may not loom at first. They may not exist but for our creating them. But under scrutiny, under the intensifying focus that we so often develop when making a decision (even a small one), differences magnify. When so much is made available to us and when we take it for granted, we demand more—perhaps just the right pale yellow. If that shade is unavailable, it's infuriating.

Oppositions have always been around: familiar versus new, active versus passive, conformity versus rebellion, local versus global. They are central to our biology and the way we interpret it: male and female, yin and yang. Gen-

erations of philosophers have analyzed free will versus determinism, the finite versus the infinite, the subjective versus the objective. But, roughly speaking, not before the twentieth century had choices and the oppositions they produce become so prevalent, to the degree that choice itself and its elemental conflicts of difference and discord have penetrated the very way we think about ourselves and our world. In short: for most of us in the developed world, *choice* has become the single major issue of our time. It will always remain so.

There are many obvious, enormous problems that we face, and will face, and some of these may prove to be insurmountable: the prevention of war, the sustainability of our ecosystems, the containment of disease, the quashing of terrorism, and the resolution of dismaying social problems. Clearly, these issues directly challenge the continued existence of humanity. Choice may not. But, if we do continue to survive, we will have coped, at least passably and temporarily, with these challenges. Choice, however, will always haunt us—increasingly so, as we develop more ways and means.

If we do carry on, those of future generations, no doubt endowed with unimaginable technological marvels, will still wallow in the same angst and mull over the same questions that we do. And when they look back (and they will), they will see that it was the twentieth century, the end of the millennium, that bore the fruit of mass production, introduced mass annihilation—and initiated an eternal era of choice.

I will document how choice has permanently changed how we think by examining both its direct influence on our cultural expression and daily lives as well as its indirect influence through its byproduct, opposition. One filter that helps us understand these processes is that of contrasting the objective and subjective. For example, the goal of the natural sciences has been to describe objective reality—to understand the workings of nature, which often seems external and detached. But the domain of the arts, humanities, and even the social sciences has always been the subjective, the workings of people, what is internal and therefore personal.

Of course, this cut-and-dried differentiation between the physical and social sciences has been vanishing. How much of psychology is biochemical? Are financial markets and ant colonies more similar than we think—merely complex adaptive systems? Are physics, economics, computing, and linguistics simply rule-based sciences of information? These questions point to the crumbling of fundamental distinctions, and the emergence of a new way of thinking. They illustrate a trend toward synthesis, a disbanding of the battle lines between disciplines that excessive analysis and specialization has created. The same trend is developing in our private lives, as we find ways to have our cake and eat it too.

To put it differently, choice demands that we form oppositions. Having to make a decision sharpens and reifies the opportunity costs of the excluded items. (As we will see later, these potential losses often seem to outweigh the possible gains.) In our attitudes toward marriage and divorce, in our debates over multiculturalism, in our theories of particle physics and in our evolving literary criticism, the newfound prevalence of choice has spawned a keen interest in oppositions, dualisms, dilemmas, contradictions, and paradoxes. This world of the complementary creates anguish (you can't have your cake and eat it too!). To alleviate this anguish, we have developed mechanisms to hedge, to compromise, to sample, to avoid, to delay, to get another chance, to *synthesize*, in order to soften the blows of exclusion and irreversibility that choice carries.

You may question what is new here. I claim that the presence of choice and its derivative themes of opposition and synthesis are responsible for much of the mentality of the twentieth century and beyond. But what about postmodernism? Isn't the subject of this book just a restatement of, or another angle on, postmodernism?

My rejoinder is no, this is not another fresh, but ultimately tiring, tome on postmodernism. Postmodernism is a notorious term, largely on account of being multifaceted and indeterminate—we shall revisit it later. Certainly theorists of postmodernism have dealt with the subject of oppositions. In one broad interpretation, postmodernism is itself antimodernism; but there exist many other subthemes that we will explore. And certainly, both postmodernism and choice are largely due to the mass production and delivery triumphs of industrial society, which are evidenced by today's consumerism.

But let me make a crucial distinction. Postmodernism—and there *is* such a thing, and it is not mere pastiche, pluralism, and everything-goes—seeks to explain a relatively new cultural norm, one that seems to transcend the established modernist norm of progress. But postmodern theorists, although they might discuss implications of natural-scientific ideas (the Heisenberg uncertainty principle being a favorite one) or social-scientific ones (in, for example, Marxist critiques of the market economy), or report on various popular trends in music, fashion, or film, are not able to trace these elements to a common theme. Instead, they have supplied a hodgepodge of origins: antimodernity, late capitalism, the rise of popular culture, multiple coding, pluralism, and

other sources that we will later review. Although these analyses are valid in part, they lack unification, and ultimately, postmodernism becomes hard to define and its development is difficult to explicate. Further, postmodernism, in concentrating on the products, cultural and otherwise, of our society, does not provide insight into our psychology and decision making. Postmodernism seems to have pervaded countless aspects of contemporary life and has been celebrated since the 1970s, and therefore one is tempted to believe, simply, that everything today is postmodern. And given the enormous changes over the last thirty years (among them being shorter memories), life indeed seems different from what it used to be. Hence, we are postmodern whereas the ancient 1950s and 1960s were modern. This argument, of course, begs the question of why this transformation was bound to happen.

With my focus on choice, I am simply highlighting a stark and fundamental element of our existence that provides a theme, a first principle to explain how and why our lives have in fact changed. Our atmosphere of choice and its attendant dilemmas, anxieties, and evasions, has attained such scope (penetrating every aspect of our lives) and scale (affecting the great majority of us in developed countries) as to transform how we think about everything, thereby shifting humanity into a new phase of civilization.

Although such transitions are gradual, we will be able to trace a buildup of this new mentality (let's skip that word "paradigm") from the late 1800s onward. By the 1950s American society was well on its way (but not quite there yet); by the 1970s, we had achieved a critical mass, as it were, reaching a point of no return. This, of course, marks the 1960s, that decade of societal upheavals, as the watershed period. We will look back at that era later.

I must be careful to avoid claiming that choice has directly caused particular attitudes, ideas, and behaviors to surface. I cannot exactly assert, for example, that physicist Niels Bohr's theory that light is both particle and wave (depending on the context) is literally a result of his having been swamped by an abundance of choices. Nor may I claim that Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken"—although it directly expresses the anguish of choice that we all confront—could not have been written in an earlier era. So just how does choice—more specifically, the enhanced choice first widely seen in the twentieth century—affect our minds and our culture?

To answer this, I have to fall back on the notion of correlation, one of the cornerstones of both natural and social science. Any discussion about behavior, decision making, lifestyles, and ideas must entail consideration of social and intellectual phenomena. If we have learned anything about such things, it is that they are complex—beholden to no one simple schema. We can't say that poverty causes violent crime, or that television viewing causes obesity. We can, however, suggest that, under certain, perhaps not fully understood, conditions, there is an association, a *relationship*, between poverty and violent crime, or between TV watching and weight gain.

When these notions are *quantified*, that is, when poverty is measured by income or assets, and obesity is measured in pounds, we can design experiments and gather data that, when analyzed, may be shown to support our hypotheses. Correlation, a statistical tool of social and physical scientists, provides a numerical measure of how strongly the phenomena in question are related. Scientists can pinpoint what percentage of the variation in the behavior they are studying, like obesity, is explained by the factor(s) they have singled out to explain it, like TV viewing. We say, loosely, that things are correlated when an increase, say, in one factor, is consistent with an increase (or a decrease) in another.

But caution again: nobody said anything about cause and effect. If you found out that stock market behavior was in sync with the phases of the moon, you could invest accordingly and make a fortune—even with absolutely *no* causal relationship whatever between the two. (Let me concede up front that, regrettably, I have no financial advice for you in the pages ahead.)

So, I am not planning to demonstrate that people in the twentieth century have had x percent more choices to make than did their forbears in the nineteenth century and that their such-and-such output measures were up by y. (Note, however, that researchers are beginning to do this: recently Christian Broda and David Weinstein estimated that the fourfold increase in the variety of imported products available in the United States over the past thirty years accounts for a rise in our collective welfare of approximately 3 percent.) What will become clear in the pages ahead is that over the past century or so there has been an explosion of choice in our personal lives and a simultaneous introduction of intellectual ideas and social behaviors that I link directly to choice or its derived oppositions. These instances are countless, diverse, and surprising—surprising in the breadth of connections that can be made. Some of these connections are straightforward, like relating choices on life's path to the Robert Frost poem, or to Hugh Everett III's many-worlds theory in quantum physics, or to nondeterminism in computer science. (Straightforward but still fascinating.) Other connections are not so obvious, like relating Einstein's relativity, Saussure's linguistics, Gödel's logic, and Disney's trailers.

At this point, it is fair to ask, in our increasingly bottom-line-driven society, of what use is this theory? It is all well and good to identify choice as the crucial element in our lives, but how can we employ this awareness in order to live better? In other words, how can we profit from it? Choice is a great challenge—agreed. Having to live with excessive choice is what delineates more modern from less modern society—fine. What can we do about it?

Although I will save predictions and prescriptions for the last chapter, I can touch on the essential theme here. Our exposure to choice has brought us not only the repeated anguish of decision making, but also the realization that sometimes we can have our cake and eat it too (or at least come close). We have discovered that oppositions can tear us apart; but, as we are frequently able to reconcile them successfully, we feel, increasingly, that we need not give something up. We no longer accept that something has to go. As with so many other aspects of our consumer society, when we sacrifice less, our wants become needs.

To put it differently, over the last couple of generations we have conditioned ourselves not to give up on contradictions. Thus we have developed profound needs, not just passing urges, to trace divergent paths. To this end, we have formed various strategies: we change cars and houses; we change jobs; we change careers, even spouses. Yet there is little compromise in all of this, except regarding lasting commitment. Nothing endures; time becomes the next variable that we attempt to control, in our determination to reverse the irreversible, to go back and find out what we missed.

This necessity to travel down all of life's branches is real for us. It wasn't for our predecessors. It is here to stay. And the lesson in this is that in so many natural dualisms—security versus risk, conformity versus rebellion, familiar versus new (to name a few)—we cannot completely neglect one in favor of the other. I am not recommending a simple balance, or compromise, or a hedging of bets. But I am saying that to maximize the potential of an individual, or a relationship, or a society, we must attend to complementary needs. How this takes place depends on many factors. Couples that marry permanently may need to find fresh activities; risk takers, some stability. The point is, trade-offs are not always the exclusionary dilemmas that they seem.

How the Era of Choice Came About

Is it possible to back up the claim that our lives differ, choicewise, from those of our ancestors? A focus on the twentieth century would entail a comparison with the nineteenth century, at the very least. We will examine this historical context in the next chapter. But there are two catalysts of choice we should consider right now: First, the "usual suspect" of industrial society, namely, the growing prosperity brought on by burgeoning production and distribution systems, and second, the loss of the absolute, originating in the nineteenth century. These two factors are complementary. That is, our newfound prosperity alone would certainly have complicated our lives, and expanded our day-to-day choices. Without the loss of the absolute, however, our sense of importance as free and empowered individuals would have remained stifled, and choice as a concept would never have attained its current importance. Only at the turn of the last century did both of these factors emerge.

The loss of the absolute, as we shall see, involved a collection of events that reduced humankind's confidence in underlying objective truths about the world. This loss was felt both spiritually and scientifically, and had various sociopolitical and psychological implications. Waning objectivity was accompanied by rising subjectivity, which meant two things. The lack of a definitive moral or scientific foundation left, literally, an existential void in which people had to develop an identity and accept more responsibility for their actions. Then as now, it was easier to discover an identity in products and possessions than it was to build one emotionally and spiritually. At the same time, the lack of particular objective norms freed up the attitude to accept alternative viewpoints—the "relativity" that has seeped into so many areas of discourse with such controversy.

As for the plethora of new products available to ordinary people, the trend, which has snowballed over the past century, began in America and spread to Europe and beyond. A brief glimpse at some facts and figures will prove most instructive in understanding to what extent choice truly pervades contemporary living and how little, comparatively, it influenced mainstream life prior to 1900.

We all have some idea about just how much our standard of living has increased over the past century. But what *is* "standard of living"? Is it the availability of (virtually) unlimited fresh water, proper sanitation, and central heating, as well as plentiful and enjoyable food and opportunity? Or is it more than that? We usually resort to various quantifications: how much discretionary income, how much free time; how many labor-saving appliances; how much stuff. This topic invariably ignites the old debate: does a higher

standard of living—as commonly measured by *acquisition*—indicate a better life?

This is dangerous ground to tread on. There exists, of course, a longstanding tradition of criticism of the consumer economy. Economist Stanley Lebergott, cites, among others, the vituperations of Thorstein Veblen and Stuart Chase from the 1920s, Henry George from an earlier era, and Vance Packard, Joan Robinson, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Tibor Scitovsky from a later one. Rather than begin a diatribe against our vanishing values, let me attempt to gain some perspective with selected data (all of which, unless otherwise specified, is from Lebergott). A century ago, life expectancy itself was much shorter; however, as that figure is an average, and is therefore fraught with all the peculiarities of averages, perhaps a different measure will give you pause. Consider the following diseases that are rarely fatal today: measles, diphtheria, typhoid, polio, whooping cough, mumps, rubella, influenza, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and gastritis. In 1900, people were one hundred times as likely to die in the United States from one of these diseases than from AIDS today. This alone would lead you to suspect that life is a lot more secure today. With more time to live, we have more choices to make, both for the short- and long-term.

More convincing are measures of relative wealth, free time, and purchasing power. One thing we take for granted is the ability to work and play around the clock. It is a very natural course of events that so many things are becoming 24/7. But a mere century ago, only 3 percent of U.S. households even had electric lighting. We easily forget how the simple extension of the day provides numerous opportunities that our forebears could only dream about. And "dream" is the right word; they worked harder than we do and surely needed their rest. A century ago the great majority of people worked on farms or toiled in factories. Farmers worked from before sunup until after sundown. The typical week for nonfarm workers in 1900 consisted of six ten-hour days; the "normal" forty-hour work week became regulation only in 1938. The sixty-hour work week of 1900 shrank to thirty-nine hours by 1975.

"Just thirty-nine hours? Who? No one I know," you might be thinking. Indeed, as the economist Robert Frank points out, numerous measurements indicate that since the mid-1970s, our work weeks have increased, on average, by a few hours. This phenomenon is not due to any loss of purchasing power for our wages. It is a probably a consequence of what Frank calls "luxury fever," an updated version of "keeping up with the Joneses" that we will

discuss later on. Despite this upturn, however, we still work far less than our ancestors of 1900 did.

How about work inside the home? Meals, laundry, and cleaning consumed a household average of over fifty-five hours per week in the early 1900s and had dropped, by 1975, to less than twenty hours per week. (For many households, the surplus thirty-five hours were often negated when the housewife joined the work force. Unfortunately for these women, they usually kept the privilege of being responsible for the other twenty hours too.) By *any* measure, though, discretionary time is relatively abundant nowadays.

What was, and is, done with this time? Pursuit of weekend recreation? Vacations? Back then, the "weekend" was Sunday alone; clearly, recreation could not have been a major societal priority. To validate this, note that annual percapita spending on recreation (in constant 1987 dollars) was all of \$83 in 1900, but was \$1,026 in 1990 and is considerably higher now. If they didn't spend money on leisure a century ago, what *did* they do with it? Well, not nearly as much as we can. Every hour of work (in constant 1982 dollars) could buy only *one-sixth* the (dollar) value a century ago as compared to today; in other words, one hour's work buys six times as much now as it did in 1900. Moreover, there was less discretionary money back then. According to journalists W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm, the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter consumed 76 percent of the average household budget in 1901 as opposed to just 37 percent nowadays. If you prefer to believe the Federal Consumer Expenditure Survey, the latter figure is about 50 percent; either way, there's a lot more money floating around now.

It is instructive, also, to compare the United States to other industrialized nations. At one extreme, we have been conditioned to believe that planned (communist) economies create bland uniformity in all of their products. Choice, therefore, would be a prerogative solely of the West. Alas, Lebergott surprises us by indicating that the USSR *planned* the production of 600 varieties of wine and 2,500 varieties of confectionery items a generation ago; in 1958–1961, China began to grow 1,500 varieties of tea. So although choice has certainly predominated in the West, it has not been absent in other economies and other cultures. A different surprise is in store when considering Europe's lag in conveniences. In 1960, 96 percent of U.S. households had refrigeration. Compare this to only 52 percent in (West) Germany, 41 percent in France, and 30 percent in Great Britain and Italy. What about hot running

water, present in 93 percent of U.S. households in 1960? Britain checked in at 77 percent, but France recorded only 41 percent, West Germany, 34 percent, and Italy an astonishing 24 percent. One could go on and on with such figures. The point is, we forget how good we have it, and how recently so many did not (or still do not). In three generations in the West, we have progressed from a typical life being one of working hard in and out of the house just to survive, to one where we all waltz daily into attractive supermarkets that have 30,000 items on display.

Choice is certainly something new in the world, manifesting itself on a scale never before seen. For those who see merely the return of well-known cycles, such as the peaks of commercialism found in ancient Greece or Rome or in the Renaissance, I will have a rejoinder in chapter 18. Principally, however, what I hope to examine in the rest of this work is how choice as a newfound phenomenon has manifested itself. Before we review its important nineteenth-century foundations in the next chapter, let's summarize what we've seen so far.

To recap: over the last century we have seen an astronomical improvement in our material well-being. The associated explosion of goods and services has led to a wealth of choices in our daily lives and life paths that had never before existed. This transformation, unique in history, makes us realize that being able to choose defines what it means to be "modern." Thus I claim that our newfound presence of choice better defines our contemporary culture than do the usual theories of modernism and postmodernism. At the very least, we need to explore the implications of choice as well as investigate modernism and postmodernism.

But we realize that even the stratospheric rise of material wealth is insufficient to explain an ethos, a cultural transformation. Something else, something spiritual, must have come about, and this is what I call "the loss of the absolute" that began in the mid-1800s. This is the rudderless feeling that we can't depend on anything—not religion, not science, not capitalism, not communism, and, finally, not liberalism, that is, our attempt to create a tolerant society that provides a foundation for individual freedoms and public functions.

Our current mindset, then, arose from a cornucopia of choice, injected with a strong dose of individual freedom but beset with attendant insecurity and responsibility. We are constantly, wonderfully awash with choices but in making these choices we feel the weight of deciding among alternatives, of considering inclusion and exclusion, opportunity and regret. We realize how keenly we

consider these decisions, and how the overwhelming availability of choice *is* overwhelming—a blessing and a curse—and it strikes us that people didn't always have such a persistent abundance of choice as we do now.

In trying to discern just what impact choice has had on our world, in the pages that follow we will explore the ways in which choice has directly influenced our personal lives. But to see the larger picture we also need to explore the changes in our cultural output—in science, philosophy, social science, art and architecture, and more. We will examine this in the context of how our society's increased focus on the resolution (and often dissolution) of oppositions and dualisms has come to affect how we view the world. We will find that choice and the consequent emphasis we place on oppositions have altered our views about reality itself. Let's begin our journey.