



## Choosing Not to Choose by Cass R. Sunstein

### Book Summary

If people's choices lead them in the wrong direction, is it really best to maintain freedom of choice? In writing this book and exploring the value of choice, Sunstein has four main goals in mind:

- (1) To demonstrate that sensible default rules make our lives both better and freer.
- (2) To explore when default rules matter and when they do not.
- (3) To outline the conditions required / preferred for active choosing.
- (4) To discuss the uses and limitations of personalised default rules.

Choice is an extraordinary benefit, but it can also be an immense burden. This is because time and attention are limited, and whenever people ask to make a choice, they are imposing on you. We cannot focus on everything, even when our interests and our values are at stake, and this is why in certain situations, it may be more beneficial for us to choose not to choose (whether this be in a forced or an active manner).

Whether or not people are aware of it, choice architecture is everywhere. Choice architects design the social context in which choices are made, and normally choose between offering individuals an active choice or moving from the default (inertia is quite powerful in the appropriate contexts). They specify when, whether, and how we choose. Regardless of the choice architecture, and as long as a mandate isn't required so as to prevent likely harm to others, freedom should always be preserved in an open and transparent manner.

Choice architects need to know the cost of the decision, the cost of errors, whether future learning is required (should there be choice required paternalism), heterogeneity in preferences, whether there are any third party effects as a result of the choice, and how often the choice is made (is it a once-off choice or is it one



that is made daily/weekly/etc.). As defaults can act as informational signals, and can be extremely sticky for those with poor “bandwidth”, great responsibility lies with the choice architect. Ensuring that defaults can be easily rejected helps to put a valuable safeguard in place.

It is natural to suppose that respect for autonomy requires respect for people’s decisions about whether and when to choose. Or is it the case that active choosing is a way to ensure that people develop certain characteristics, values and tastes, and thus, forced active choosing is required? Active choosing is when people exercise their liberty through choice making, and as they make their choices, they learn, develop their capacities, and become freer - it comes in two forms, optional and required. Simplified active choosing is when one is asked if they would like to choose or not before being asked to make the choice itself. An informed-chooser approach is selecting the default rule that reflects what most people would choose if they were adequately informed (the success of such an approach is rooted in whether or not the choice architects truly understands people’s preferences).

It is important to remember that there are potentially profound psychological differences between active choosing and defaults, with active choosing offering a distinctive signal and having a distinctive meaning to both choosers and others.

The greatest danger of highly personalised defaults is that one’s preferences become ever more refined (in a narrowing sense), and it becomes difficult to broaden ones preferences serendipitously (one no longer stumbles upon new and interesting things). In an attempt to systematically analyse whether a personalised default rule is required or not (or appropriate or not), Sunstein proposes a two-by-two choice matrix that classifies different sorts of purchases on two axes: easy/automatic vs. difficult/time consuming, and fun/pleasurable vs. not fun/pleasurable.