

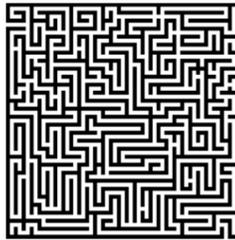
CHOICES

Never-Ending Dilemmas in Everyday Life

by

Arthur Asa Berger

San Francisco State University



Illustrated by the Author

Series in Sociology



VERNON PRESS

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Arthur Asa Berger has done it again. He has written a book that is a philosophical treatise in ontology, a semiotic analysis of the objects and events of everyday life, and a practical guide to the meaning and logic of our unconscious activities, seamlessly uniting all these threads into a masterpiece of purveyance of life's meaning. And he does all this in user-friendly language, explaining and practically illustrating profound ideas from philosophy, semiotics, and cultural analysis in an enjoyable way, as well as critiquing them when they need to be critiqued, making the book truly a great "read."

Marcel Danesi
Professor Emeritus, Anthropology
University of Toronto

Drawing from influential theories like semiotics, this invaluable book delves into the power and mechanism of choices we make. It offers practical insights into decision-making, shedding light on the pivotal role of choice in our society, culture, and personal lives, where some choices we make shape our destinies.

Dr. Yoshiko Okuyama
Professor, Japanese
Department of Languages
University of Hawaii at Hilo

Professor Berger has an excellent knowledge of the most important studies in this field and uses them extensively in his book.

He explores the phenomenon of "choice" from different perspectives -semiotic, psychoanalytic, sociological, political, etc. [and] analyses these standpoints with numerous concrete examples.

The style of the book is quite attractive. Professor Berger adheres to readability requirements and writes with a wonderful sense of humour.

[He] is also an inspired cartoonist who illustrated the book with many cartoons.

This is also good with regard to the book's attractiveness and readability.

[He] has also written a glossary of key terms relating to the main topics of the book.

[...] the book is a serious scientific achievement [and] very readable [...]

Dr. Christo Kaftandjiev
Professor, Faculty of Journalism
Sofia University, Bulgaria

Dedication

For Junchao Wang in appreciation of his friendship and his role in introducing my work to Chinese media and communication scholars and students.

Epigraph

I do not at all believe in human freedom in the philosophical sense. Everybody acts not only under external compulsion but also in accordance with inner necessity. Schopenhauer's saying, "**A man can do what he [wants], but not [want] what he [wants]**" has been a very real inspiration to me since my youth; it has been a continual consolation in the face of life's hardships, my own and others', and an unflinching well-spring of tolerance. (Boldface by A.A. Berger)

Edwards' principal reasons *for* theological determinism are God's sovereignty, the principle of sufficient reason (which requires that everything that begins to have a complete cause), the nature of motivation, and God's foreknowledge. The latter two are discussed at length. The argument from motivation depends upon Edwards' identification of willing or choosing with one's strongest inclination or preference. Since choosing just is a prevailing inclination, it is logically impossible to choose in the absence of a prevailing motive. If there is a prevailing motive, however, then the will is necessarily determined by it, for if the will were to choose contrary to a prevailing motive, the agent would have two opposed preponderant inclinations at the same time. All choices, therefore, are necessarily determined.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (n.d.). "Edwards, Jonathan."

Foreword

Bob Batchelor

Arthur Asa Berger is a magician (some would say trickster) whose specialty is making the difficult deceptively easy. He is particularly adept at writing about complex ideas – like the topic at hand – choices. As a matter of fact, if there were a central, foundational thread across all of Berger's work, that defining perspective would be “illumination”...a fancy word for explaining, enlightening, and clarifying.

Or, as he concludes in *Choices: Never Ending Dilemmas in Everyday Life*:

I hope that this book on choices will have given you some ideas about the role of choices we make in our lives, our society, our culture and our politics (among other things) and that you will be more mindful of the choices you make about both mundane and trivial matters and about significant and life shaping/ life changing choices you make, as well.

The extended quote above leads one to another Berger trick – making the philosophical applicable. As a cultural theorist existing in the “real world” and expecting that readers exist there too (unlike many academic/scholarly writers), he is interested in how they will engage with ideas. Accordingly, Berger asks the reader to “be more mindful” and hopes that his illuminations result in presenting “some ideas” that lead to more informed choices “both mundane and trivial.” Isn't this the ultimate goal of the philosopher – to provide the public with ways to navigate their lives?

Let's look a little deeper, though, at the magician behind the words. Berger uses sleight-of-hand (trickster, remember?) to ease the reader's mind, while he not only clarifies the topic, but also provides a mental model for how a person makes choices. In other words, the act of writing and illustrating is in itself a demonstration of choices. (Would any other cultural theorist/philosopher would have the audacity to illustrate their own books as Berger does in his distinct style?) Brilliant!

The other conspicuous choice Berger makes in *Choices* is to use “relatable” (an incredibly twenty-first century word) examples to bring to life the ideas of many of the world's most complex writers and thinkers. For example, he examines Karl Marx's ideas about work, but rather than a regurgitation or recitation, Berger uses it as a springboard to discuss the changing nature of work based on the Covid-19 global pandemic and recent calls for a universal four-day workweek.

As Berger notes, the choices employees (or is it more reasonable to say ex-employees) are making has an enormous consequence to the global economy. “The most important event involving work in recent times was the Covid-19 epidemic,” he explains. “It disrupted work arrangements everywhere and has led to new perspectives on work by many people. They found that they liked not having to go to the office every day, avoiding the need to commute, and could do their work at home in a more pleasant (and less dangerous) atmosphere.”

Here, the author demonstrates how Marx’s thinking endures. Even with the difficult economy, workers are making their own decisions, which is a stark contrast to the historical relationship where the employer/corporation had all the power. In the past, the power relationship tilted heavily toward the entity and those in power ultimately determined a person’s work status and employability. Today, workers are choosing a different path – instead of opting out, whether it is sliding into a more fluid “gig” economy that enables them to live a different type of lifestyle or dropping from the employment ranks altogether.

The power of Berger’s style and analysis is that he is authoritative and engaging, not forcing or bludgeoning the reader with one perspective or way of thinking. Here’s the trickster at work again...a writer fluid and conversant with the greatest thinkers in world history, yet introducing the reader to them in a way that is edifying rather than alienating.

What makes Berger so important as a thinker is that he has gladly taken on this role of public educator while existing for most of his life inside the stuffy walls of academe, noted for research that is an inch wide and a mile deep, where the generalist is scorned, along with anything that sniffs of popular culture that is not theory-laden.

We get a glimpse of Berger’s own choices in *Choices*, both at the micro- and macro-levels. Again, he is writing the book and using the exercise to demonstrate how a person makes choices. For the reader, then, the application of the author’s analysis springs to life. Writ large, Berger explains:

I had around 40,000 word choices to make, though in many cases, because of the nature of language, once I had chosen certain words, other words followed logically. This means that my choice of words is connected to all kinds of things and is not innocent. When we use words, we must assume our listeners or readers know the codes that give them meaning. That means, when I’m writing, I want to make sure that my readers know the codes and can understand what I’m writing, which explains my accessible (as best I can) writing style.

From a sentence-by-sentence perspective, we see a different mode of analysis, one much more pertinent to how people assess information. “If you think of a

book as like a trial,” Berger says, “The people whose ideas and quotes I offer can be thought of as witnesses for the defense, since my books are, in the final analysis, arguments about a topic that I am making.” Most people encounter this same type of analysis in crime dramas on television or film and in the countless thrillers, mysteries, and true crime books published each year. For Berger, he is simply serving up another form of assessment in a way that people are familiar with and can put to use right away.

THE POWER OF CHOICES

What I hope readers will gather from this brief essay is that the value of Berger’s *Choices* is that I am attempting to model his analysis and style. More importantly, both being a lifelong reader/admirer of his work and engaging with *Choices*, I have made deliberate changes in my own thinking about choice.

For example, Berger’s analysis and ideas have led me to double-down on my decision-making as a consumer and creator of culture. After reading *Choices*, I am rethinking how my purchasing options have consequences, including what types of brands I want to support as a buyer. Along these lines, one might ask: Does a specific brand and its leadership align with my feelings about diversity, equity, and inclusion? Or, a reader might question how their seemingly mundane choices ultimately have consequences in relation to the global climate crisis or economic disparities.

Choices is ultimately a testament to Berger’s standing as a cultural theorist and writer. In the ever-evolving landscape of ideas, with countless images, impulses, and declarations raining down on us in every conscious moment, Berger guides us as we navigate the complicated tapestry of human expression and societal dynamics.

There are simply few cultural critics who have been able to achieve what he has accomplished or at such a prolific pace. The Library of Congress, for example, lists about 140 books he has written, while sources show that he has been cited more than 25,000 times. As a fellow author, I shudder at the notion that both of these figures are probably underreported.

I count us lucky to live in an “Age of Berger,” in which a thinker of his eminent stature has provided readers with a lifetime of work that has helped people understand themselves, as well as their families, communities, and society at large. By every possible definition, Arthur Asa Berger is an intellectual force whose contributions to the realm of cultural theory and the global body of knowledge have left an indelible mark on our understanding of the world around us. *Choices* indeed!

Bob Batchelor is a cultural historian and biographer. He wrote *Stan Lee: A Life*; *Stan Lee: The Man Behind Marvel, Young Adult Edition*; *Roadhouse Blues: Morrison, the Doors, and the Death Days of the Sixties*; and others looking at contemporary history. His books have won three Independent Book Awards and been translated into a dozen languages. Batchelor's work has appeared in *Time*, *The New York Times*, *PopMatters*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, and *Los Angeles Times*. He is the creator and host of the podcasts "Tales of the Bourbon King: The Life and True Crimes of George Remus" and "John Updike: American Writer, American Life." He has appeared as an on-air commentator for The National Geographic Channel, *PBS NewsHour*, *Wondery*, and NPR.

Bob received a doctorate at the University of South Florida. He has taught at universities in Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, as well as Vienna, Austria. Bob lives in North Carolina with his wife Suzette, an antique and vintage expert, and their teenage daughters. Visit bobbatchelor.com.

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About the Author



Various Images of the Author and Seal

Arthur Asa Berger is Professor Emeritus of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University, where he taught from 1965 to 2003. He graduated in 1954 from the University of Massachusetts, where he majored in literature and philosophy. He received an MA in journalism and creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1956. He was drafted shortly after graduating from Iowa and served in the U.S. Army in the Military District of Washington in Washington, D.C., where he was a feature writer and speechwriter in the District's Public Information Office. He also wrote about high school sports for *The Washington Post* on weekend evenings while in the army.

Berger spent a year touring Europe after he left the Army and then went to the University of Minnesota, where he received a Ph.D. in American Studies in 1965. He wrote his dissertation on the comic strip *Li'l Abner*. In 1963-64, he had a Fulbright Scholarship to Italy and taught at the University of Milan. He spent a year as a visiting professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at The University of Southern California in Los Angeles in 1984, and two months in the fall of 2007 as a visiting professor at the School of Hotel and Tourism at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He spent a month lecturing at Jinan University in Guangzhou and ten days at Tsinghua University in Beijing in Spring 2009.

He is the author of over one hundred articles published in the United States and abroad, many book reviews, and more than 90 books on the mass media, popular culture, humor, tourism, and everyday life. Among his books are *Bloom's Morning*, *The Academic Writer's Toolkit: A User's Manual*; *Media Analysis Technique*; *Seeing is Believing: An Introduction to Visual Communication*; *Ads, Fads and Consumer Culture*; *The Art of Comedy Writing*; and *Shop 'Til You Drop: Consumer Behavior and American Culture*. Berger is also an artist and has illustrated many of his books.

He has also written several comic academic mysteries such as *Postmortem for a Postmodernist*, *Mistake in Identity*, *The Mass Comm Murders: Five Media Theorists Self-Destruct*, and *Durkheim is Dead: Sherlock Holmes is Introduced to Sociological Theory*. His books have been translated into German, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Swedish, Korean, Turkish and Chinese, and he has lectured in more than a dozen countries during his career.

Berger is married, has two children and four grandchildren, and lives in Mill Valley, California. He enjoys traveling and classical music.

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