

Deciding What to Become

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Heartiest congratulations to all of you! I'll bet you've been getting a lot of congratulations lately. And I wonder, have the congratulations often been followed by a question? A question something like this: "Now that you're graduating, what are you going to do with your life?" Or even a tougher question: "What will you become?"

These questions are jarring because they signal that the era of unlimited future choices is about to end. When you're a student at an excellent university like yours, everyone sees you as a person with unlimited potential. It seems that you'll be able to follow successfully whatever path you want. But now your undergraduate years are ending. Now what? The question is familiar to others of us long after we've graduated, perhaps as we leave one job or move from one place to another.

Some people seem to have always had the answer—they just knew they would become a doctor or a nuclear physicist. Maybe you're one of those. But for many of us the answer isn't evident. We know we want to use our minds and our spirits, and we like lots of things. But many of the standard paths don't seem right for us, or not evidently so. Does that sound familiar? If so, what can we do to help decide what to become?

One idea is to sit down, think hard, and overpower the problem intellectually. In the late 1960s a Harvard student wrote his senior honors thesis on the topic, "What I Should Do After Graduation." He used the mathematical technique of decision analysis to analyze all his options. He laid out every contingency pertaining to every choice. He assigned a numerical value to each possible outcome. Then he calculated which path had the highest utility.

The result was shocking. His analysis concluded that he should join the Army.

During the Vietnam War, this was not the usual answer. Something must have gone wrong. The bewildered student consulted his thesis adviser, a renowned specialist in decision analysis. How, he asked, could this technique for rational choice produce such a bizarre answer?

The advisor began at the beginning. What was the student's utility function? That is, what mattered to him? What did he value, and how much compared with other things? The student had found it uncomfortable to try to list all the so-called "attributes" of his utility function—and then, to try to trade them off against each other.

The student and the adviser went over the list of valued attributes one by one. Suddenly, the student lit up.

"I see what I forgot," he exclaimed. "I left out my sex life!"

This is not an omission I would expect many undergraduates to make. But it is true that when we think about the future it is hard to know or to remember all the things that matter to us.

Most formal techniques for analyzing choice assume that the things we value are given. But these may be precisely what we need to discover. What values *should* we pursue? We probably can't find out by writing a senior thesis. We may need to try out different life values and see how they feel. We may need to experiment.

Experiments

It's a truism that experience is the great teacher, but also I like that word, *experiment*. It emphasizes that we must learn from experience but also that our experiences need not be haphazard, that we can plan them and evaluate them. In thinking about what experiments you should design for yourself, you may find it helpful to ponder five basic values, or if you will basic paths.

The first of these we might call is naive egotism. The idea is to maximize your own happiness. According to this basic value, if someone asks you why you are doing thus-and-so with your life, the appropriate answer is "Because it makes me happy."

I might add, parenthetically, that it turns out not to be so easy to know what will make you happy, or happiest. But the point is that this first alternative treats your own happiness, no matter how narrow or wide its reach, as the objective to be sought.

A second basic value you might experiment with is altruistic. Here the idea is to increase everyone's happiness, not just your own. You should choose a life that would contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number—to use a formulation that is familiar but strictly speaking impossible—and you should do so even if some other path would leave you yourself better off.

Attention: it turns out not to be so easy to say what makes mankind happy, either.

The third basic value might be called scientific. The goal here is not to make yourself or others happy, rather to seek and to attain truth. Forget about serving yourself or serving others. No great scientist, advised sociologist Max Weber, "has ever done anything but serve his work and only his work."

A fourth value is artistic. The idea here is to create something authentic and uniquely yours. "Within the world of art," writes philosopher Stanley Cavell, "one makes one's own dangers, takes one's chances—and one speaks of its objects at such moments in terms of tension, problem, imbalance, necessity, shock, surprise." Notice that he does not include happiness, altruism, or truth among the objects of art.

Finally, a fifth basic value might be called religious. Describing the objective here is difficult. One may speak of trying to engage infinity, or ultimate reality, or God. It is the religious person, the "homo religiosus," writes psychoanalyst Erik Erikson,

who looks through the historical parade of cultures and civilizations, styles, and isms which provide most of us with a glorious and yet miserably fragile sense of immortal identity, defined status, and collective grandeur and faces the central truth of nothingness—and, *mirabile dictu*, gains power from it.

These are five redoubtable paths. They don't necessarily conflict. On the other hand, these diverse goals do not automatically overlap, and you may not know which should be yours. How might you find out?

My point is you can't do it in your armchair. You need experience. Perhaps, you need to experiment: you need to make a willful effort to put yourself in circumstances—and in the frame of mind—where you can test alternative ways of valuing the world. Be an experimenter—with your own life.

For example, you might test your altruistic values by placing yourself in an impoverished setting, where you define your concerns as helping those around you. You might experiment with your artistic side and try, for a while, painting or sculpting or composing. To explore a religious dimension, you might try for a period of time to pass at least four hours a day in prayer and meditation.

Gestation

If you do undertake such experiments, you should expect several things to happen. It will probably take time for an answer to emerge for you. The process may be likened to pregnancy. After a gestation period, a clarification of your deepest values, even that feeling of wholeness you have been looking for, may emerge, naturally.

If you are fortunate, your answer of what to become will combine a personal problem, *your* personal problem, with a problem outside yourself, in historical time. Such a combination, Erik Erikson observed, distinguished the lives of Luther, Darwin, Freud, and Gandhi. In their own ways, melding “my problem *and* the world’s problem” forged their identities.

These reflections have important implications for those worried about what they will become. One implication is this: perhaps you shouldn’t worry too urgently about which path to choose. You don’t have to decide this minute what to become.

And you probably can’t decide just by thinking about it. In fact, becoming what you will become may be hindered if you try too hard or too soon to define yourself. Consider Friedrich Nietzsche’s advice:

To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion of *what* one is. From this point of view even the *blunders* of life have their own meaning and value—the occasional side roads and wrong roads, the delays, “modesties,” seriousness wasted on tasks that are remote from *the* task. All this can express great prudence, even the supreme prudence: where “know thyself” would be the recipe for ruin, forgetting oneself, *misunderstanding* oneself ... become reason itself.

So many dangers that the instinct comes too soon to “understand itself.” Meanwhile the organizing “idea” that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down—it begins to command; slowly it leads us *back* from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares “single” qualities and fitnesses that will one day prove to be indispensable as means toward a whole—one by one, it trains all *servient* capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, “goal,” “aim,” or “meaning.”

So, if you’re badgered these days by questions about what you’re planning to do with your life and you don’t have an answer, take heart. You probably don’t yet know exactly what you should value—and that’s all right. To find out, don’t just think about it, get experience. Better still, *experiment*.

And in the meantime, take solace from a dictum of Napoleon Bonaparte’s. “Show me a man who knows exactly where he is going, and I will show you a man who is not going very far.” Need I add that that goes for women, too.

Thank you.