

On the Analysis of Choices

By Ken Andersen

Aristotle in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* offers a “doctrine of choices” as a key element in developing our moral standing. In any situation we are faced with a range of choices. This range of recognized choices varies with the individual. To the degree one conceives of a wider range of choices about which to deliberate, the likelihood of a better choice improves. If wise, we seek second opinions, third options, and more information, and not just in medicine. We do not deliberate about options that do not occur to us and we build habitual patterns of response.

Central to his approach is the reality that making one choice in turn opens up other choices, as does each succeeding choice likewise. The initial selection determines the field of choices that will follow. The good (wise) person will over time make a series of better choices even if not the best choice in each instance. That individual develops a habit of making good moral choices, becoming a virtuous individual living a “good” life as that person chooses among ever better options that previous choices yield.

The doctrine of choices is not limited to individuals; it applies to decisions of family, club or church, faculty senate, every community local, state, or nation. Aristotle makes it clear that actions (choices) have consequences that determine the nature of future choice fields. Bad choices lead to poorer options and from there to ever more bad options unless the pattern is reversed. Downward spirals resulting from bad choices become hard to reverse. Witness the financial state of Illinois.

Consider the decision to go to war in Iraq. At the time many thought that a good choice. Fewer do so today. Let us accept the decision to go to war as a given. What fields of choices follow? Multiple choices in a variety of areas must be made given that initial choice. Two that remain significant: we downplayed the war in Afghanistan. Likely of more consequence for the nation was the decision to add the costs of the Iraq War to our national debt. (Nor did we weigh the cost of the care for veterans for decades to come.) The consequences of the choice to add to the debt now confounds a nation facing a huge national debt, a major recession, and a partisan, deadlocked Congress unable to respond to the nation’s needs.

Confronted with the imperatives of the moment, public attention is largely devoted to short-term remedies. Needed? Yes. But a realistic concern for our future welfare as a nation would focus on substantial investments that have a long term, continuous payoff. Infrastructure such as roads, bridges, high speed rail, improving city infrastructure such as mass transit, repair and upgrading of sewer and water systems, replacing outmoded natural gas lines, etc.

Given the responsibilities of the readers of *Illinois Academe*, you may well ask, “When do we take up the subject of education, not just higher education but the whole of education from birth to death?” We are there; you likely already were. Enhanced education probably is the most important infrastructure need in an information age.

Pick any recent issue of *Time* or one of the countless editorial and op-ed pieces in newspaper after newspaper: the need to enhance education quality and education attainment levels is featured. From international leadership as a nation, we now rank in the teens in comparisons of reading ability, lower than that in math. Industries unceasingly advertise for individuals to meet their needs while the unemployment rate is at best steady. The actual unemployment and underemployment rate is not calculated.

Current weaknesses in our educational attainment are the result of past choices, individually and collectively. We have the option to switch from choices that are negative to positive ones. Illinois has set a goal of 60% of Illinois adults will have post-secondary credentials by 2025, 14 years from now! Currently we are at 41%. Note this focus is people, not number of degrees granted. A woman earning an associate degree from Rend Lake Community College, a B.A. from Western Illinois University, an M.A. from Columbia College in Chicago, and a Ph.D. at one of the University of Illinois campuses holds four degrees but is only 1 person. The holder of four degrees is a count of 1 toward the goal.

How realistic is the goal? The bad choices with regard to the state-funded pension systems now haunt Illinois just as the national debt haunts Congress. Sins of the parents are borne by the children and grandchildren. But of greater concern are the choices being made today. There is no new money for performance based funding. We expect a continued rise in tuition at public institutions given a continuing decline in state support. MAP funds are inadequate to meet spring allocations. Nationally, Pell grants do not receive adequate funding. News reports say the massive total student debt now is larger than the total of credit card debt. N.B.: As Suzy Orman reminds us, college loan debts cannot be discharged through bankruptcy

but until repaid follow individuals for their entire lives.

I don't have a sense of what is politically possible to move us forward. Tax increases at the Federal level for some individuals and corporations are long overdue. Illinois still enjoys a moderate middle range of taxation compared to other states nationally and our corporate tax rate is lower than all but one nearby state. But anti-tax increase fever rages in Illinois as it does nationally.

The effects of prior choices must be dealt with. But choices affecting our future, however difficult, are ours to make. We need to throw a pail of cold water over our collective heads and face up to the choices that we must make. Collectively and individually, we need to recognize the reality of the tomorrow we are fashioning today.

Can we? Yes! Will we? Well, I try to be optimistic, even living in Illinois.