

Contemplative Practices and Teaching Scitovsky's *The Joyless Economy*

Daniel P. Barbezat
Amherst College

In order to make choices that lead to our well-being, we need discernment and understanding to determine the conditions that bring about positive outcomes and the awareness to recognize them in order to act in ways that are congruent with our well-being. This is a paper exploring the context of teaching undergraduates to understand the expression of their own desires in markets. In this paper, I will describe an exercise that illustrates the concepts of Tibor Scitovsky's work on well-being. Students experience the concepts outlined by Scitovsky and come to understand them more deeply through engaging with practices that allow them to directly experience the embedded ideas. In addition, once they see the benefits from closely watching their experience, they become more curious about cultivating attention and begin to inquire more deeply into the nature of their desires and actions.

Economics is often simply defined as the study of the allocation of scarce resources. The need for careful attention to “allocation” comes from the scarcity – if there were infinite amounts of everything with absolutely no constraints, we would not need to attend to allocation. However, “scarcity” doesn’t exist on its own; rather, it is created through the relationship of our desires and what is available. If our wanting exceeds what is produced or what is available, then we have scarcity. In economics, the expression of our *wanting* is known as “demand” and what is available is known as “supply.” Market economics studies the interaction of demand and supply. It is the study of how we manage the interaction of our desires with what is available and how we make choices. Normally, the intent of the allocation is thought of as securing the highest level of economic welfare possible, given the constraints; economics is fundamentally concerned with the nature of our wanting, the distribution of goods, and achieving well-being.

Yet what is the nature of our wanting? How do we manage our wants in the face of constraints to secure our well-being? In essence, how do we make choices? In order to make choices that lead to our well-being, we need the discernment and understanding to recognize the conditions that will bring about positive outcomes and the awareness to determine them in order to act in ways that are congruent with our well-being. This is a paper exploring the demand side of the

equation—an exploration conducted in the context of teaching undergraduates to understand the expression of their own desires in markets. In this paper, I will describe an exercise that illustrates the concepts of Tibor Scitovsky’s work on well-being. Students experience the concepts outlined by Scitovsky and come to understand them more deeply through engaging with practices that allow them to directly experience the embedded ideas. In addition, once they see the benefits from closely watching their experience, they become more curious about cultivating attention and begin to inquire more deeply into the nature of their desires and actions.

In the traditional economic paradigm, the satisfaction of our desires results in an increase in our welfare or utility.¹ Even though associated with “consumer welfare,” and “utility,” economics is a social science most associated with tradeoffs, opportunity costs and constraints, infamously known as the “dismal science.” In fact, I was not surprised to find that a search for “happiness” over the period 1975-1990 using the economic literature database EconLit yielded just 18 results. However, I was rather surprised to discover that a search for “happiness” over the period 1991-2015 yielded 2,353 results. Changes in the idea of the “quality of life” and “life satisfaction,” along with a growing interest in more subtle and robust ways to think about development and standards of living, has sparked an increasing interest in subjective well-being data. Survey data on well-being has been used to test both micro- and macroeconomic theories and to estimate the impact of public policies. Upon learning of this vast literature, I wanted to explore it and teach a class that examined it.

In the spring of 2009, I first taught my course Consumption and the Pursuit of Happiness. It began as a course to examine the uses of subjective well-being data, but over the past years it has steadily moved to incorporate more of an examination of the nature of consumers’ expression of desire in the marketplace. Along with psychological and economic theory, one of the key instruments of this inquiry has been guided introspection initiated by contemplative classroom exercises.

Contemplative Exercises and Economics

We want to engage our students in their learning and our teaching, yet no matter how we frame our classes, we remain the teachers, leading the students through the material and, ultimately, grading their work over the semester. The one aspect of their learning over which students are sovereign, though, is their awareness of their experience and their own thoughts and reactions to the material covered in the course. The careful examination of their private responses can be a powerful

¹ This, of course, does not mean that some measure of “utility” needs to be expressed, a notion that Pareto famously deemed a “metaphysical entity.” It was Samuelson’s “A Note on the Pure Theory of Consumer’s Behavior” (1938) that laid out an axiomatic approach to equating underlying preferences with those revealed. For a systematic treatment of the long history of the development of “utility” in economics, see the two-part article on utility theory by George Stigler in the *Journal of Political Economy*.

ally in both student engagement and understanding. In much of formal education we understandably stress the abstract and conceptual; learning requires this powerful form of thinking. However, we have often stressed this form of learning to the exclusion of personal reflection, integration, and insight.

To be sure, many others have thought about the reform of college education. The overall success and clear vision of higher education has been brought into question by many educators, e.g., Bok (2007), Lewis (2006), and Parker and Zajonc (2010). Certainly, reform has been suggested in the past by the use of direct student experience. For example, the famous work of John Dewey and Jean Piaget and the radical reframing of education by Paolo Freire all have experiential components at the heart of their systems. In fact, whole educational systems have been built around experience. For example, the experiential learning theory of Daniel Kolb posits two sets of related inquiries: *concrete experience* and *abstract conceptualization* on the one hand, and *reflective observation* and *active experimentation* on the other. Although introspective/contemplative approaches are experiential of a kind, they are distinct in their focus on mental attention, focused awareness, and insight arising from guided introspection/contemplation/meditation.

In this paper, I focus on introspection with an example of an exercise that provokes students into an awareness of their preferences and requires them to examine their experience. In contemplative traditions, introspection has been a major source of insight, and it is beyond the realm of this essay to outline the ways in which the contemplative traditions of Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have fostered and developed introspection. However, in the modern Western tradition of psychology and pedagogy, introspection once had a vibrant tradition. In fact, the birth of Western psychology as a discipline came out of an attempt to gather first-person data so that theories of mind and consciousness could be moved from the realm of speculation to a more data-driven, scientific methodology.

At the turn of the 19th century, Pierre Maine de Biran recognized the essential nature of what we could call introspection, and later in the 19th century, Franz Brentano, Wilhelm Wundt, and William James all saw what James declared—namely that “[i]ntrospective observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always” (James, p. 185). There began a research program carried out in both Europe (in Paris under Alfred Binet and in Germany by the Würzburg school headed by Oswald Külpe) and the United States (centered at Cornell University under Edward Bradford Titchener). These research programs were based on the idea that first-person accounts provided rigorous, primary data on which the science of behavior and mind, *psychology*, could be developed. Common to all these approaches was the idea that the subjects had to be trained, in both the fineness of the awareness of their perception and its careful articulation, by the researcher or “mediator.” These cautions were forgotten over time, and critiques of intro-

spective research often ignore the fact that traditionally research was undertaken only with subjects having extensive training in focused attention and introspection. (For a description of the training, see Chapter 5 in Schwitzgabel [2011]).

It is not my intent to respond at length to the large and very interesting literature about the critiques of introspection. While we need a good sense of caution in drawing conclusions from our students' reports, this does not mean that these reports are worthless. As Pierre Vermersch (1999) points out, "What is wrong about this line of reasoning is that it moves from the premise that there are facts which are inaccessible to consciousness to the conclusion that even what is accessible to consciousness is uninteresting or non-scientific, and this *a priori*, which is not only absurd but wholly unjustified" (p. 28). What distinguishes the "experience" in the exercises examined here is that it is focused on students' introspection and the cultivation of awareness. The exercises can be relatively simple and mainly conducted in their own minds. Formally legitimizing their own personal experience changes students' relationship to the material being covered. I cannot tell you how many students have nervously asked whether they could use "I" in their papers. A direct inquiry brought about through their own introspection both validates and deepens their understanding of themselves and of the material covered. These exercises can be elaborate or starkly simple—they have only to support the student in examining their own relationship to the material, framed by their own life.

There needn't be a question about how the material students are learning fits into "the real world" or is in some way relevant to their lives. Through the use of these sorts of exercises, the presentation of the material can be approached in a manner through which they can directly see how it impacts their lives. It can build capacity, deepen understanding, generate compassion, and initiate an inquiry into their own nature.

Introspective/contemplative exercises have a variety of objectives:

- building attention (mainly through focusing meditation and exercises that support mental stability),
- encouraging deeper understanding of the content of the course (through exercises designed to have students discover the material in themselves and thus deepen their understanding of the material),
- fostering compassion and a deepening sense of the moral/spiritual aspect of their education (through lovingkindness practice, etc.—contemplative practices are uniquely situated to support this sort of inquiry, and acting in ways counter to our deepest beliefs cause agitation and a troubled mind),
- dealing with contradiction and difference, (for example, exercises designed to examine our multiple identities) and
- establishing a somewhat subversive element designed to allow them to

begin an inquiry into the nature of their minds and selves. (A simple meditation focusing on the breath can quickly lead to an inquiry as to where intervening thoughts come from, the nature of our self-determination, etc. It can indeed be a profound moment for students to realize they are fully in control of neither their awareness nor their overall experience. However, this can have a dangerous element in it also; more on this later.)

In economics, we can use these practices to support students' inquiry into the assumptions and concepts behind the models that they are learning, fostering both a more holistic approach to their learning and a deeper understanding of their own experience and the material of the course.

Utility, Introspection, and Economics

The idea of focusing on the nature of our wanting has a long tradition in economics. Stanley Jevons (1888) realized that at the center of economic theory of the consumer lay the complexity of our wanting. He stated:

My principal work now lies in tracing out the exact nature and conditions of utility. It seems strange indeed that economists have not bestowed more minute attention on a subject which doubtless furnishes the true key to the problem of Economics. (III.13)

And again,

Economics must be founded upon a full and accurate investigation of the conditions of utility; and, to understand this element, we must necessarily examine the wants and desires of man. (III.4)

In many ways, it seems that the term for the new field of "behavioral economics" is a sort of redundancy, since market economics is the study of human behavior in markets; over 120 years ago, Jevons understood that economics was about describing behavior, specifically the behavior of the expression of our desires. As a study of human behavior managing scarcity, economics would have to study the underlying behavioral conditions of agents. In order to understand the very condition underlying all market economics, we must understand the nature of desire and its expression. Indeed, economics has a long tradition of framing its study of behavior in the empirical investigations of psychology. Late into the 19th century, as psychology began scientifically investigating behavior, it was used as the underpinning of attempts at understanding economic decisions.

It was Vilfredo Pareto who so powerfully put economics on its current track of denying any influence from behavioral sciences; Pareto was convinced that actions could be analyzed by a rational "science of logical action." However, if this were to be true, he recognized that the actions considered would have to be quite limited. Pareto constructed his political economy on two basic principles: (a) that

it should only be concerned with repeated, well understood actions, and (b) that all action is directed toward the satisfaction of tastes through the acquisition of goods, viz., that all actions must be instrumental in order to be logical.

However, it has been recognized that a very fertile ground for investigations of our economic behavior is the study of own arising desires. In their paper on the turning away of economics from psychology, Bruni and Sugden (2007) state, echoing James earlier: “In understanding the relationship between psychology and economics at this time [prior to Pareto], it is important to recognize that, in both disciplines, introspection was treated as a legitimate source of data” (p. 151). I believe that it is time to return to this source—not to the exclusion of other forms of knowing, but, rather, using introspection as complementary to them. In a real sense, all economic models are situated in behavioral assumptions about economic agents. Coming to understand these models requires knowing both these assumptions and their implications. Through the use of guided introspection, students can examine these assumptions firsthand and thus understand the economic theory itself more clearly and deeply: more clearly because they can discern the underlying principles of the models, and more deeply because they can begin to discern how the material they are studying is relevant to their own and others’ lives.

In my course *Consumption and the Pursuit of Happiness*, before examining the way subjective well-being data has been used in micro- and macroeconomic contexts, we begin with an inquiry into the nature of our wanting and well-being. Just like the late-19th-century economists, we start with an examination of our underlying preferences. We read Kent Berridge and Morten Kringlebach’s (2008) work on the science of wanting and liking (“affective neuroscience”) and Ed Diener and Daniel Kahneman’s work on well-being, utility, and measurement. Students begin to make finer distinctions about their preferences. For example, Berridge and Kringlebach (2008) show the importance of distinguishing between “wanting” (incentive salience processes that are not necessarily conscious as well as conscious desires for cognitive goals) and “liking” (the actual pleasure component or hedonic impact of reward, whether explicitly felt in the consciousness or not) and how the experience of pleasure is affected by cognition. This introduces the student to the complexity of both their desires and their hedonic experiences and raises the issue as to just how much control or even agency they have with respect to their overall well-being.

Scitovsky and the Tradeoff of Comfort and Pleasure

Soon after, we turn to a remarkable text that was many years overlooked by economists and psychologists but has in recent years staged somewhat of a comeback and come to be seen as a forerunner (along with the even earlier work of Herbert Simon) of “behavioral economics.” In 1976, Tibor Scitovsky’s *The Joyless*

Economy: The Psychology of Human Satisfaction was published. In it, Scitovsky develops the idea that as an affluent nation we have chosen a level of comfort that makes our lives end up less fulfilling and less pleasurable. While we have a great deal of static comfort to which we have fully adapted, we have little pleasure and even less sustained *joy*. Scitovsky builds on the work of H.J. Eysenck and others who believe that we seek a level of arousal that is optimal in the sense that it “gives rise to a feeling of comfort and well-being.”

When our level of arousal is far under our optimum, we feel bored and uninterested; when it is too far above, we feel agitated and overwhelmed. “Pleasure” is the feeling we get from moving toward our optimum. Scitovsky points out that we should note two aspects of our pleasure: (a) that in order to experience pleasure, we must have some discomfort, and (b) that the pleasure from achieving our comfort level is short-lived. Thus, if we cling to comfort, we have no pleasure. Staying in comfort, we have no new experiences, so we have no novelty; we quickly become bored with our former “comfort” and then have to seek new ways of entertaining ourselves, often with even higher stimuli.² Thus, in this tradeoff between “pleasure” and “comfort” we over-choose comfort. Scitovsky’s view of human well-being is not based on a single metric that rises or falls; rather, our well-being is plural, comprised of pleasure and comfort, making the satisfaction of our wants a far more complicated matter than simply choosing the option that gives us *the most* satisfaction.

An easy example of this is eating. Think of how our ancestors loved and anticipated feasts. Perhaps you are old enough to remember your own feasts. I remember them: holidays like Thanksgiving were amazing events of eating.³ For many Americans, eating is such a commonplace that people hardly notice they are eating and do so while reading, watching television, or even driving; we, as a nation, tend to overeat. Through repeated action, we become habituated to a level of consumption—here eating—that ends up actually reducing our ability to have pleasure. The idea, though, that our *utility*, in an economic sense, is not a single, linear measure that simply either rises or falls is a more difficult idea for students to immediately understand, and one whose implications are quite important. The idea that our desires are complex and often contradictory means that at any moment in time we cannot satisfy them all optimally, since what is “best” along one measure is not the same along another. This means that simply “maximizing utility” (the basic model of the consumer for neoclassical economics) becomes far more complicated when we not only add time or uncertainty but also consider alternate

2 People who seek extreme experiences, like skydivers, seem to require more and more stimulus in order to feel anything. See, for example, Franken, Zijlstra, and Muris (2006).

3 I moved a lot as a kid, and I remember the excited anticipation of each move because my parents would treat all the friends helping us move (including me) to McDonald’s, a very special and rare event.

measures of satisfaction. At this point, it is not too surprising that students see all of this as abstract theorizing, and that, while they find it somewhat interesting, they do not see how it would make any difference to their own consumption.⁴

I point out that this approach provides a model to explain habituation, addiction and irrational, welfare-reducing choices. Scitovsky develops a mechanism to explain why, when we are so rich and comfortable, we are not necessarily happy. This stands in the face of both “more is preferred to less” and “people act in their best interest,” two of the mainstays of traditional, neoclassical theory. It develops the idea that current consumption is not independent of past consumption, and it sees current consumption choices as contextual rather than simply the interplay between given, fixed preferences and prices.

Scitovsky develops this welfare trap by making a distinction between “defensive” and “creative” products, one first proposed by Sir Ralph Hawtrey. “Defensive” products defend against discomfort and directly achieve gains to visceral desires or “appetitive desires,” as in the example of fast food as a quick response to hunger. “Creative” products, on the other hand, achieve welfare through more complex avenues like social interaction and creation—for example, improvising and cooking meals with friends. Pursuing defensive consumption lacks the positive spillovers of creative consumption and, in fact, harms the future possibility of creative consumption. However, defensive consumption is much easier in the short run. Creative acts require the development of skills and are usually more time-consuming; it is not surprising that, from a myopic outlook, defensive consumption seems preferential. The power of habit formation and the negative externalities of this consumption make the alternative consumption of creative acts more difficult and thus less chosen, even though it would lead to greater welfare in the long run. Essentially, the consumer is not aware of the long-run costs of defensive consumption and therefore tends toward the over-choosing of immediate comfort. Scitovsky provides watching television as a prime example. Watching television requires hardly any effort yet is quite diverting. However, staying home and watching television regularly reduces social interaction, limiting the opportunities for future interactions and hence lowering overall well-being (Bruni & Stanca, 2008). Unaware of the long-run implications of their choice to watch television (five or so hours per day for the average American), consumers become trapped and habituated to an activity that isolates them and leaves them at a lower level of long-run satisfaction.

Now, as Amartya Sen (1996, 1999) points out, Scitovsky is not proposing a paternalistic view, demanding that consumers be forced into more creative pursuits. No; rather it is consumers’ lack of awareness that is the problem. Increased

4 Economists have noted this sort of problem. As Amartya Sen (1977) has shown, we may have preferences about our preferences expressed over different dimensions that could be compared in what he has called a “meta-ranking.”

self-awareness and attention to the implications of their consumption would indicate to consumers that they are pursuing boredom rather than well-being. With increased awareness and focus, consumers can use their agency to change their “preferences” and break out of habitual traps.⁵ One of the prime means for consumers to learn and become more aware is in their education, especially one that includes the broad liberal arts.

For students trained in the rigors of neoclassical economics, this is a lot to swallow. Students wonder about all this and ask: why would people over-choose comfort if they would be better off not doing so? They understand the concepts but, understandably, don't have a way to map them onto their own experience, into their own lives. I have the students read Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of the *The Joyless Economy* and we discuss the distinctions and implications. Through this process, they come to a theoretical understanding of both what Scitovsky is saying and its implications—and how this relates to the research on “wanting,” “liking,” and addiction. We discuss habituation and the externality of comfort, along with the idea that the immediate timing of the payoff of comfort likely biases people toward it, away from the delayed pleasure of experiencing some discomfort to achieve a stimulating life. I have them write a paper in which they explore the idea of the optimal level of arousal and the paradox of the “appetizer,” in which eating more could actually make you want to eat more. This conceptual examination of the text is vital to their understanding of the material and is also the ground for introspective inquiry into their own behavior.

Classroom Exercise

After my students have some analytic command of the material as outlined above, I engage them in the following exercise. With about 20 minutes left in the class, I have them settle and focus first on sound and then on their breath⁶, and I ask them, “On a scale of 1-10, how are you doing right now?” I then ask them just to sit in that for a moment. Next, I tell them to gather their books and belongings and move to another part of the room, sitting next to someone they do not know. This causes a bit of discomfort—having to move and the potentially awkward moment of choosing a partner. The sorting has some starts and stops but is over rather quickly. After the students have settled, I tell them to introduce themselves to their partner. This begins a bit of talking and the energy starts to rise as they talk back and forth.

After a few moments of allowing them to meet and talk with one another,

5 Freedom and welfare are common and highly developed themes for Sen (1999). For the importance of awareness in the context of Scitovsky's work, see Sen (1996).

6 At this point in the semester, students are accustomed to doing exercises of “open awareness” aimed at developing their sense of directed attention.

I ask them again to assess how they are doing now. I next say, “OK, thank you. You’ve introduced yourself to the person. Good. Now tell the other person what you *want* to say to them.” This causes a major reaction: nervous laughter, “What?” and other reactions of disbelief. Nobody says anything to each other. I let them sit in that for a moment and repeat the command. Again, nothing happens. You can easily feel the discomfort in the room. We all say we want freedom, but it can be a daunting state. We all want what we want, right? And we want the freedom to express what we want...or do we? Suddenly speaking seems quite daunting. Why? If you suddenly can’t speak what you *want* to say, then what were you doing before?

Students quickly realize: without the tight constraints imposed by others, what will we reveal about ourselves? We believe that our wants reveal something about ourselves—their expression in markets is likely to have social/status/framing components that might have little to do with the direct object of our consumption. I also point out that our conventional introductions reveal very little about ourselves; I reach out to the student in the front row, extend my hand, shake his, and say, “Hi. I’m Dan.” What have I revealed? Not much. They are now engaged directly with the complexity of their wanting and its expression.

I repeat the command once again, and, after a short time, they begin to talk. The energy quickly rises; clearly they are engaged with each other. After a bit, I ask them to again sit quietly, close their eyes, and check in: “OK, now how are you doing on a scale of 1-10?” I ask them to keep their eyes closed and let me know by raising their hands if they are worse off now than earlier. Students smile as I point out that they seem at least as well-off now as when they chose the seat for the class and whom they would sit next to. I ask them to note (like when hearing the sounds earlier, just note) what it was like for them in the last few moments of speaking with their partner: how was it to move and choose a partner? How was it to start speaking after I asked them to say what they wanted? I give them some time to journal in their notebooks, writing down what they noticed. After each exercise, I give them some time to write down their reactions, insights and questions so that they can use these notes for a paper at the end of the semester that asks them to relate the exercises to the material of the course.

As you can well imagine, students choose the same seat each class. By mid-semester, each (save one or two) has a seat that is somehow *theirs*; in fact, if someone else were to sit in it, there would certainly be an awkward moment of reshuffling. With this exercise they see, in their own experience, the sense of discomfort from perturbing their comfort, as well as starting to examine facets of their wanting that might have been obscured to them. They were sitting where they wanted to, with whom they wanted. Suddenly they were in another part of the room, seeking another partner. One of the students reported, “When Professor Barbezat asked us all to get up and sit next to someone we didn’t know, my first reaction was anxiety.” Another said, “It was somewhat strange and even nerve-racking

finding new people to sit next to.” The exercise was designed to reveal, in their own experience, the sense of comfort from sitting in the same seat each class, then to create a bit of anxiety or discomfort by perturbing it, and then to have the discomfort ease with the finding of partners and starting to chat, as well as to illustrate the multiplicity of their wanting and the habitual nature of their choices. In experiencing these, students directly experience the ideas from the *Joyless Economy*, but I have not framed the exercise in terms of Scitovsky. The students themselves, through their experience, make this connection. Invariably, near the end of the exercise, one of the students says something like, “This is Scitovsky—you’ve ‘scitovskied’ us!”

I created a discussion forum for students to post their observations about the exercise (anonymous posts were allowed). I was struck by how many students made the connection to their discomfort and pleasure, noting how much this exercise mirrored the material in Scitovsky. In fact, many of the students found that the initial discomfort afforded them the possibility of great pleasure and a sense of increased well-being. Students reported that they quickly recognized this sense of comfort, discomfort, and pleasure. Typical of this response, a student said, “My well-being nearly doubled in a span of several minutes and the exercise reinforced that I do enjoy meeting new people, and that the initial displeasure is well worth the end result.” Others made the same connection but noted that leaving comfort is risky:

I also feel that Scitovsky’s position on pleasure and comfort can help to explain some of the reasoning behind why I choose to sit next to someone I know. By sitting next to someone I know I am maximizing my level of comfort. I know the person, so I know they won’t think I’m weird if I sit next to them and if there are a few minutes available at the beginning or end of class I will be able to talk to someone without having to leave my comfort zone. Whereas in speaking to a complete stranger I must first decrease my level of comfort, by making the first attempt to engage them in conversation and then potentially experience pleasure if the conversation goes well or potentially experience additional discomfort and displeasure if the conversation doesn’t go well.

Students recognized how their discomfort allowed them to experience the possibility of pleasure; however, they also noted that this discomfort, if allowed, might not result in pleasure. This is an interesting insight and one not examined extensively by Scitovsky: discomfort is risky. We are uncertain what lies on the other side of leaving comfort, providing another reason for remaining in comfort even to the point of boredom. This is an important insight because not only does this link directly to the material on Scitovsky but it also helps to explain the under-

lying reason why we might over-choose comfort: the recognition that the potential experience might not go well, leaving us with even more discomfort. In fact, an attempt at moving into discomfort met with a negative outcome could make the person far less willing to take the initial risk. Even without my mentioning it, they realize that this is connected to risk aversion and expected gains.

Not surprisingly, in the class after the exercise and over the next few weeks students returned to their initial, self-assigned seats—the seats that they had chosen prior to the exercise. I pointed out to them that even though most of them said that they enjoyed sitting somewhere new, next to someone new, here in the next class and thereafter they returned right back to their original seats. They could directly experience the sense in which they would return to comfort, just as Scitovsky claimed. Did they actually prefer their original seats? Was it simply too risky—even though most had found the change positive—to try something new again? These questions arose not as abstractions but in response to their actual behavior. They had new insights into Scitovsky's observation about the potentially welfare-reducing choices around comfort.

The level of discomfort in the exercise was also raised with the command to “say what you *want*.” This is an especially interesting part of the exercise for me. Immediately, students began to think what they were about to say would somehow be attributed more directly to them. The reframing of their interaction in terms of “wanting” completely changed their relationship to their partner. One student noted, “When Professor Barbezat asked us to tell our new acquaintance something that we wanted them to know, my mind began to race for something that would not reveal a lot of information about myself and still be somewhat interesting to my new acquaintance.” Another said, “I think that being given the instruction to say something that you ‘wanted’ to tell the other person was a bit stressful. I was perfectly talkative in the first part of the exercise, but after the second instruction I felt whatever I said would be judged as something I really wanted to tell these people.”

From this, students recognize for themselves that we hold wants and their expression as something deeply telling about ourselves, even though our “wants” or “preferences” are not fully in our control—they seem to simply arise. (Though certain tastes can be cultivated, if you don't like orange juice you can't suddenly decide to be the sort of person who likes orange juice...) What is the nature of our freedom and agency with respect to our preferences? What do our preferences actually say about us? Is the fulfillment of these wants really the expression of our freedom, even if what we are going after is not fully in our control? Students begin to reflect on these questions in light of their experience of the exercise.

At the same time, the students experience directly that we rarely want one unified thing. Here the student was actually afraid of what they wanted because of their simultaneous wanting to be accepted and not judged harshly for break-

ing “social convention.” The stark recognition of this fact is far more powerful than simply telling the students, “We often have competing wants.” One student lamented,

I felt really nervous and uncomfortable when we were asked to tell the person something we wanted to say to them...The idea of just telling a person what you really want to tell them, especially someone you don't really know, goes against all social conventions.

Another student even had a stronger reaction,

When asked to tell the person next to me something I “wanted” to tell them, I resolved immediately to do no such thing. Not only did I not have anything in mind at the time, but the potency of this seemingly simple request shocked me. Answering it truthfully would potentially peel back layer upon layer of social armor. Gone would be the feigned indifference and plausible deniability that permeate our daily interactions. Instead, this unknown person would gain a small window into our real selves—they would learn that we'd taken careful note of their covert nose-picking from across the room, or of our desperate desire for friends, or that we were so mistrustful of strangers that we couldn't really say anything at all.

The students were able to apply their experience to the reading, but also they were able to discover in their reactions the material of the course. In a sense, they could begin to examine the nature of their wanting and their relationships to others, now with the frame of Scitovsky's analysis. They saw how discomfort and pleasure were related, how pleasure takes a certain risk, and how their wanting is complex and often arising in a multiplicity of conflicting wants. The notion of satisfying these wants would have to address the basic question, “Satisfaction for what?” They also saw how returning to the status quo can be very compelling; in this example, they came to inquire as to why they selected the same seat. In this examination, they could see that the only way to tell whether they were choosing the same seat out of comfortable habit or out of actual maximizing behavior was the application of awareness, just as Sen had stated. Finally, they began to examine the notion that their wants reveal something about themselves. In essence, they were deeply inquiring about their wanting, all in the context of what Scitovsky had laid out. Of course, all of this was possible by their bringing their attention to their own experience, something in which, surprisingly, we have to train ourselves—as most of you know only too well!

Conclusion and Consequences

I hope this example illustrates the gains of having students reflect on their own experience in order to gain better insight into the material of the course. I chose here a simple exercise so that you could see that the set up does not have to be elaborate to stimulate reflection. The example provided focuses on three of the main motivations for using contemplative/introspective exercises: (a) increased focus, (b) deeper understanding of the material covered in the course, and (c) expanded inquiry into the nature of ourselves and those around us. In the exercise for the Scitovsky reading, the aim was to illustrate the importance of awareness for the attainment of well-being while having students directly discover elements of the reading in their own behavior. In addition, I hoped that this process would initiate an inquiry into the meaning and nature of their wanting so that they would be able to discern more subtle aspects of their actions. I believe that only through a process of direct experience can these elements be fostered.

I do want to note, though, that this sort of work is not without its dangers. Misappropriating modes from different traditions, casting students into reflections for which they are unprepared, and inappropriately therapizing or providing spiritual guidance to students and thereby blurring the role of ourselves as teachers are all real possibilities. In my course, leading students through the workings of their desires and actions can be more than simply “stressful” for them. A great deal of damage can be done without a connection to the students during the exercise. I believe that this can be developed both in the classroom through a clear attention to language; and on one’s own, through a developed reflective/introspective/meditative practice and an awareness of the possible problems.

What is at stake is extremely important. Developing personal awareness in ourselves and our students is vitally important. In my field, our ability to choose effectively is being called into question. Failures of our affective forecasting, our bounded rationality and our ability to weigh short- and long-run impacts are being used to suggest that we might be better off if our choices were limited or even if others made our decisions for us. A number of popular books outline the ways in which we are “predictably irrational” and the difficult time we have in making good decisions. Writers like Barry Schwartz, in articles and his book *Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, are arguing that we have too much choice and that we should learn to be more satisfied with what we have. The “choice architecture” of Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein creates an environment of “libertarian paternalism,” where people are free to choose in carefully constructed environments that ensure the likelihood of certain behaviors. Daniel Gilbert’s analysis of the failures of our imagination results in such grievous affective forecasting that we are better off selecting “choice surrogates” that provide answers to what we should do based on their own experience. Finally, the neuroeconomist Colin Camerer’s cautious

praise of paternalism, in limiting our choices due to our inability to negotiate the subtleties of the differences between wanting and liking, supports the idea that we are, again, better off turning over our agency to “agencies.”⁷ This entire movement seems to concede that it is better if we simply admit to our limitations and turn our choices or the environments in which we choose over to “experts” who know better than ourselves. I believe that this is a dangerous movement and that, rather than look for solutions outside ourselves, we must develop and nurture our abilities of personal awareness and introspection. While of course there are situations in which we might want to turn to experts or limit our choices, we, ourselves are the only ones who should determine when and to whom we should turn. Knowing these things requires a good deal of self-knowledge. Rather than take our limitations as a given, I believe that we can develop our skills at introspection and personal awareness.

References

- Berridge, K., & Kringlebach, M. (2008). Affective neuroscience of pleasure: reward in humans and animals. *Psychopharmacology*, 199, 457-480.
- Bok, D. (2007). *Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bruni, L., & Stanca, L. (2008). Watching alone: Relational goods, television, and happiness. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 65, 506-528.
- Bruni, L., & Sugden, R. (2007). The road not taken: How psychology was removed from economics, and how it might be brought back. *The Economic Journal*, 117.516, 146-173.
- Franken, I. H. A., Zijlstra, C., & Muris, P. (2006). Are nonpharmacological induced rewards related to anhedonia? A study among skydivers. *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology & Biological Psychiatry*, 30, 297-300.
- James, Willam. (1890) *The Principles of Psychology* New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- Lewis, H. (2006). *Excellence without a soul: Does liberal education have a future?* New York: PublicAffairs.

⁷ See for example, Barry Shwartz, (2004) *The Paradox of Choice* New York, NY: HarperCollins; Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, (2003) “Libertarian Paternalism,” *American Economic Review* 93, 175-179; Daniel T. Gilbert et al, (2009) “The Surprising Power of Neighborly Advice,” *Science* 323, 1617-1619; Colin Camerer (2006) “Wanting, Liking and Learning,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 73, 87 – 110.

- Parker, P., & Zajonc, A. (2010). *The Heart of higher education: A call to renewal*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schwitzgabel, E. (2011). *Perplexities of consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Scitovsky, T. (1992). *The joyless economy*. New York: Oxford.
- Sen, A. (1977). Rational fools: A critique of the behavioural foundations of economic theory. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6, 317-344.
- Sen, A. (1996). Rationality, joy, and freedom. *Critical Review*, 10, 481-494.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. New York: Knopf.
- Vermersch, P. (1999). Introspection as practice. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6, 17-42.