

Preface

This book focusses on one substantive issue – the significance of the role of choice in human affairs. Drawing on a range of contributions the case advanced will seek to demonstrate that, though perhaps not often the primary issue under consideration, a concern with choice has featured consistently in a range of literature. Beginning in the Hellenistic world of the Stoics through to the religious and philosophical ideas of the Middle Ages, the question of choice becomes an emergent property in developing discussions of the nature of man (taking their term of reference). It is evident from these early interventions that such analyses could never quite shake off the determining influence of both the gods or God and the heavens above when accounting for the element of choice in human affairs. With the advent of the modern period the early legacy of determinism and free will becomes systematised in connection with a range of other concerns, most notably the issues of morality and ethics. We have, here, too, the depiction for the first time of the free and autonomous individual at liberty to make his very own choices as long as it does not impinge on the interests of others.

The first part of the book concentrates on reviewing the increasing importance accorded to choice in modern philosophical accounts beginning in the seventeenth century. There is an obvious step change with the work of Immanuel Kant and due consideration will be given to his legacy with regard to the parameters of freedom in human choice. In the post-Kantian period, choice comes to be treated as being something of an issue in its own right, with the impetus for such approaches often being associated with the name of Søren Kierkegaard. From the second half of the nineteenth century quite divergent schools of thought become increasingly apparent, although each, in its own way, has something of significance to contribute

to the, by now, ongoing debate on choice. The account will take us up to quite recent contributions in the early years of this century. Nevertheless, it would appear that such philosophy provides us with only half of the story of choice, seeming to lack consistently the absolutely necessary social and historical dimension to make any real sense of the part played by choice in human affairs.

So, the second part of the book considers those aspects of social thought that add this essential level of interpretation. It has to be said, however, that these social theorists themselves find it hard to make a clean break with the legacy of past conceptions. The question of the status of determinism and freedom of will, for example, just does not seem to want to go away, although it takes on quite new guises. Fortune, fate and belief in luck continue to take their place, somewhat awkwardly, alongside theories of social action and interaction, social structure and power, and access to scarce resources and various kinds of discrimination. The coming of the choice-making sovereign individual seems to have been beset by a series of problems identified in the literature from Locke onwards: an apparent personal unease, disquiet and dissatisfaction; the effect of an impersonal social structure constraining aspiration and opportunity; and individuals finding themselves tied and bound to the social system, in a final irony, by the choices they themselves have been encouraged to make. To contextualise this development the final chapter will explore the economic and political arrangement that has made all of this possible: capitalism in its liberal-democratic moment with a particular emphasis on the effect of liberalism in fashioning a 'home-from-home' for the choice maker.