

Having a Choice

The idea of natural law has been debated for centuries. Whether a law conducting human behavior exists *a priori* or not, we certainly can agree that the idea of survival is paramount in the minds of all human beings—that seems as indisputable a law of nature as can be. It is therefore rationally self-interested to want to defend oneself. (This does not imply that it is irrational to risk one's life in defense of another—the rationality of that action depends on a number of factors outside the scope of this essay.) Given a choice, we opt for survival. If we didn't automatically opt for survival, we would not bother to feed or clothe ourselves, take medicine, or look both ways when crossing the street.

There is another aspect of the “law” of innate desire for self-protection that drifts into the argument about natural law: free choice. When attacked, we are forced to make the choice for survival that is so innate that it is no choice at all. Most of us therefore consider it offensive to have to choose between fighting for the right to be left alone and simply allowing a robber, for example, to have what he wants. What if he wants our health or our life? We are then compelled to fight, choosing potential stress and injury if we win and more severe stress and injury if we lose (even if we were to remain living).

There are a small percentage of people who like fighting or enjoy danger so much that their choices would be quite different from the majority of both martial artists and untrained people. Perhaps a psychologist could explain their attitudes, but no explanation is needed for the majority attitude—most would choose vexation at having to choose between bad and worse.

A loss of freedom is especial egregious when it does not just *limit* choice but *compels* a choice. We do not feel terribly un-free if we are not allowed to traverse the intersection on a red light, cannot abscond with our neighbor's retirement fund, or cannot beat to a bloody pulp the leader of the gang who attacked us. These occurrences are not felt as losses of freedom because, as specific restrictions, they leave untouched so many other options: taking another route, finding a more lucrative profession, beating off an antagonist rather than beating him up. However, imagine how offended we would feel if we were *compelled* to traverse the intersection on a red light regardless of crossing traffic, *compelled* to commit a theft regardless of our neighbor's welfare or the penalties we'd incur once caught, or *compelled* to beat to a bloody pulp the leader of the gang who attacked us. Then, we are not simply restricted from one choice but restricted from all-but-one choice. That is painfully close to the compulsion we feel in a self-defense situation.

Certainly we train to have several choices: to avoid, deflect, wound, or cripple, but in the heat of self-protection, we do not always have the time or the presence of mind to “choose”. In fact, we train to react so that once we are forced into the simple choice of personal protection, the more complex choices of what to do are not necessary—we are on “automatic”.

Both those who accept the existence of “natural law” and those who question it look on compulsion and the threat of actual force as evil. That’s why, in all just societies, those who forcedly compel others are themselves compelled to lose their freedoms.

Because the instinct to defend oneself is as close to a natural law as we can imagine, and because the instinct to never have to engage in a fight is almost as natural, I am doubly incensed if pushed to act in self-defense with martial arts. Next to life, the virtue that people are most willing to fight for is freedom. Although freedom may not mean having an abundance of choices, it does mean not being compelled into a limited choice—one of acting violently or being acted upon violently.

I would prefer to have all the choices that studying a fascinating art can bring. That’s why I have been a martial artist for five decades. I would prefer never to be pushed to use the martial part of that equation, but if I am...well...you probably wouldn’t like a man who acts without choices.