

Ideas in Progress, Season 2, Episode 19, “Why It's OK to Make Bad Choices” with Bill Glod

- Anthony Comegna: [00:20](#) If you're familiar enough with IHS, today's guest probably needs no introduction. Bill Glod is one of our senior program officers, a philosopher by training, and he helps graduate students become professors, and helps professors flourish in their careers.
- Anthony Comegna: [00:35](#) Bill's latest venture is the forthcoming book, *It's OK to Make Bad Choices*. All right Bill, welcome to the show. And we're here to talk about your forthcoming book, it's called *Why It's OK to Make Bad Choices*. And I think that probably a little bit like Chris Coyne's book *Doing Bad by Doing Good*, I at least can imagine a lot of people hearing your title and especially maybe knowing a bit about your background, you work for IHS at George Mason and whatever else, and people could just run away with it. "Here we go. It's another one of these libertarian, so-called liberal people making the argument that we should all just be able to do whatever we want and the consequences be damned, ethics be damned, free-for-all."
- Anthony Comegna: [01:25](#) So what do you say to that kind of challenge?
- Bill Glod: [01:29](#) Well in a way that's kind of what this whole series is trying to do. It's this new series with Routledge Press that aims to defend the common practices that are often unpopular among academics and even among laypeople. I don't think it's quite so far as a damn the consequences-type view, but these titles often defend unpopular ones nonetheless.
- Bill Glod: [01:50](#) So for example, other titles in this series include, *Why It's OK to Want to Be Rich*, *Why It's OK to Ignore Politics*, and then mine, *Why It's OK to Make Bad Choices*, which I'll qualify this a little bit as we go along. We just would like it to have a provocative title too.
- Bill Glod: [02:06](#) But it's precisely the general public that this series is aiming at, especially open-minded laypeople and undergraduates. We want the series to challenge the traditional ways of thinking. Not all readers will be persuaded of course, but we want them to think harder about views which are unpopular or with which they disagree.
- Anthony Comegna: [02:26](#) Do you think the charge of just being contrarian is fair? I mean, you're arguing essentially that, "Hey, it's fine if you do the wrong thing," but I don't know. It's not, obviously.
- Bill Glod: [02:40](#) Yeah, right. I might be able to help clarify that by just doing a quick little overview of the book, maybe just a little chapter-by-

chapter thumbnail sketch. So since I'm focusing on bad choices, a large part of the book critically addresses what's called paternalism. Generally speaking, this is the view that it may be permissible for others, private actors or also the state, to prevent you from making certain bad choices for your own good, not necessarily to prevent harm from others, but for your own good, to save yourself as it were. So that is sort of my focus for much of the book.

Bill Glod: [03:15](#) So I have seven chapters. The first chapter goes into why it's okay to make bad choices when, say, you and others can learn from them and they don't cause sort of the major types of harms, like the really bad stuff that usually concern the, I think the best defenders of paternalism. So even paternalists will grant that people need some space to learn from their mistakes, to experiment, to maybe be an example that others can learn from.

Bill Glod: [03:41](#) So they don't necessarily say, "Hey, we need to have a nanny state that regulates all of our behavior and all facets of our life," that's just not really a serious argument that they entertain, but I argue that paternalists don't go far enough, that we should have even more space for freedom to make bad choices if that's the kind of freedom that we want. Okay, so that's kind of chapter one outlines that sort of framework.

Bill Glod: [04:05](#) In chapter two, I argue that it's okay to make bad choices since we can't assume oftentimes that they are actually bad, bad and scare quotes when evaluated in context. So I can maybe discuss in a little bit an example of a story I tell of a character who, to us, maybe at first glance is making terrible choices, but maybe given the constraints he is under, it's not so clear that he is. So that's chapter two.

Bill Glod: [04:30](#) In chapter three, I argue that of course there are some actually bad choices though, truly bad ones, by people's own lights, by their own beliefs and values, they would acknowledge, "Yes, these are bad choices. I shouldn't be making them." Nonetheless, I argue that it's okay to have the freedom to make even bad choices, because it's not okay for people to stop you from making bad choices when you want this freedom, for instance, if you want this freedom for all your choices or having this wide scope of freedom comprises a significant conception of your identity.

Bill Glod: [05:02](#) So maybe for philosophical reasons, religious ethical reasons, you want to have this wider scope for freedom and autonomy than a lot of paternalists typically argue people should have.

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- Bill Glod: [05:13](#) So real quickly, chapter four, I then argue that it's okay to have the freedom to make even really bad choices because it's not okay for people to assume you are fine with coercive paternalism by not already rejecting it, all right? So there may be some people who are neither ... maybe they haven't even thought about the issue, so they neither really endorse paternalism, nor do they reject it. They're kind of, for whatever reason, just maybe agnostic or unfamiliar.
- Bill Glod: [05:40](#) And I argue that it would be problematic to just assume that the pro-paternalist view is the default view and that we should go ahead and intervene with them unless they already reject paternalism. I think that moves too quickly.
- Bill Glod: [05:53](#) Okay. Chapter five I argue that it's okay to have the freedom to make bad choices if they are genuinely your choices, that is they are sufficiently voluntary, they're not issuing from some kind of cognitive or motivational issue that maybe is beyond your control or your awareness, right? So it's not really your choice in that sense. So I can come back to that a little bit if need be.
- Bill Glod: [06:17](#) Chapter six is actually a movement away from the paternalism discussion. So there I argue, what about bad choices that do impose social costs? Negative externalities, harms on other people, what do we do about that? So I explore sort of tentatively some maybe different ways we can handle that, but basically the idea there is it's okay to have the freedom to make bad choices if allowing such freedom doesn't impose undue costs on others without their consent, okay?
- Bill Glod: [06:45](#) And then finally chapter seven, I argue that it's okay to have the freedom to make bad choices if restricting such freedom would raise undue costs or harms to others or to those we aim to benefit. So it's kind of a public choice chapter, I look at sort of the dark side of prohibitions, the unintended consequences of regulation, and say like, "Even if you haven't bought my argument up until now, you should be careful about exploring the ways in which well-intentioned laws and regulations can still go wrong in ways that maybe we can't predict, or the past has provided examples of."
- Bill Glod: [07:17](#) So just to sum up, sometimes it's morally or rationally okay to make bad choices, you can learn from them, you can become a better person, your character can develop. Other times it's altogether okay because they're not really bad choices at all when explored in context. And then still other times it's at least legally okay, maybe not morally or prudentially, but legally okay

to make truly bad choices because it's not okay for the state or other private actors to stop you.

Anthony Comegna: [07:47](#) Now it sounds kind of like you're casting paternalists as essentially utilitarians. They're really concerned with the consequences of people's behavior and making sure that things turn out on the good side of that calculus rather than the bad side. But it seems to me that most people who make paternalistic arguments for everything or all sorts of things usually do it on maybe not on a rights-based set of claims, but they think that some people essentially have some sort of right to make decisions for others, and it's good that we follow this order for reasons other than the consequences.

Anthony Comegna: [08:29](#) And I'm just wondering what other ways are there to think about paternalism and the relative values of it? What are some of the strengths of that point of view that you have to deal with before you can counter it?

Bill Glod: [08:44](#) So maybe by way of example I could go into a current author who I think provides one of the more interesting defenses of paternalism. This would be Jason Hanna. He's a philosopher at Northern Illinois University and he recently came out with a book, a very well-written book called *In Our Best Interest*, and he comes at this not really from a consequentialist angle.

Bill Glod: [09:04](#) I mean, he does think consequences matter and some defenders of paternalism are consequentialists, but he doesn't really take that approach. He takes sort of an interesting dialectical approach, and that's not really to give direct arguments favoring paternalism. So he's not like, "Here's a consequentialist argument," or a deontological argument or something. Aristotelian. He doesn't do that so much as instead argue that common objections to paternalism can also be used against other practices that we typically endorse.

Bill Glod: [09:35](#) So this suggests that there's nothing distinctively objectionable about paternalism. If the objections that we bring to paternalism can also be applied to these other things that we typically do endorse, then why are we picking on paternalism as being especially problematic is sort of his approach. Yeah. Should I follow up with a couple of examples?

Anthony Comegna: [09:56](#) Yeah, sure. Yeah.

Bill Glod: [09:57](#) Okay, cool. Some object, this is Hanley, one of the objections that he considers, some objective paternalism is wrong because

it imposes views or values on people that they need not themselves hold. So paternalists are in some sense imposing their wills on people who are supposed to be their equals. I'm kind of assuming like a liberal democratic framework where we're free and equal citizens. But in this case, the objection goes that paternalists are substituting their own judgments for what should be the judgments of those targeted by the paternalism. They should be the ones that decide how their lives go.

Bill Glod: [10:34](#) But Hanna replies to this, he has an interesting reply. He says there are lots of non-paternalistic cases in which we impose views or values on people without finding the infringements all that objectionable. I don't think this is his example, but I use it in the book. Imagine we see someone torturing puppies because this is his favorite hobby in the world. We make him stop because that stuff just doesn't happen in our modern liberal democracies, and his objection that we are imposing our dog-lover views or our humane views on him in a way really doesn't matter in this context.

Bill Glod: [11:08](#) But then turn to a different example. What is distinctively problematic about banning cigarettes, even if smokers really like smoking? So Hanna observes that we need an argument independent of the mere fact that we're imposing our views. Now maybe you can appeal to something like a right of self-ownership or some other factors providing the distinction between the two cases, but this also requires an argument and then notice then we're moving away from regarding mere value imposition position as the offending issue, as the wrong making factor.

Bill Glod: [11:38](#) So that's one example. I can go to another one unless you wanted to-

Anthony Comegna: [11:41](#) No, go ahead because I'm trying to figure out. I'm not quite sure about some of the assumptions that seem to be in place here, and I'm not quite sure how to formulate the question because I wonder, for example, about the liberal framework of society that we're supposed to be operating in here. I don't know how strong that framework is.

Bill Glod: [12:02](#) Yeah.

Anthony Comegna: [12:03](#) Sometimes it seems paper-thin and like it's only a myth. And that because we buy into it, we think that all this stuff is sacred and safe, and so much of our liberal assumptions just fall through. When you look at people's daily practices of life and

their daily thoughts and habits, that they can be just horrible petty tyrants at every chance they get.

- Bill Glod: [12:29](#) Yeah, it is unfortunate. And in this regard, I am trying to sort of find some common cause with defenders of paternalism who would bemoan that very same thing as well. That they're trying to do a genuine liberal democratic, but still case for paternalism. And so I sort of try to take them on common ground.
- Bill Glod: [12:47](#) I'm not going to go into the weeds about defending the framework itself or whether we even can live up to it or whether this is just hopelessly ideal, I think I can sort of latch onto some sort of common practices people do engage in that are amenable to liberalism and then say, "Okay, well go farther, go farther by your own premises," right?
- Bill Glod: [13:05](#) But let me just quickly cover a second common objection that Hanna looks at, and this common objection is that paternalistic laws can be abused. So maybe this speaks a little bit to what you were referring to earlier. So for this objection, it's not so much that the laws are wrong in and of themselves. The worries are more about what could result if they aren't wisely implemented or if they get into the hands of petty tyrants. And if these laws can be abused or misapplied, the objection goes, we should dispense with them altogether.
- Bill Glod: [13:38](#) So Hanna's response to that is more or less, "Well, sure. But any law can be abused. So what's the distinct problem with paternalistic laws? Why do they get singled out for this accusation rather than other sorts of laws we typically support, or at least most people support despite those laws being facing a risk of abuse as well?" So basically much of Hanna's strategy is an invitation to skeptics of paternalism to provide the missing link. What's so bad about paternalism when what you accuse it of is perfectly fine in other contexts? And I hope this book suggests some of those missing links.
- Anthony Comegna: [14:14](#) Yeah. That just takes me back to reading John Locke, for example, and his first treatise, which is the one that's almost universally forgotten about and nobody ever talks about it, but it's fascinating-
- Bill Glod: [14:26](#) And much larger too.
- Anthony Comegna: [14:27](#) Yeah, it's so important because he tackles paternalism explicitly. And in his context, it's specifically the idea that Adam's authority transfers down the ages to monarchs.

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- Bill Glod: [14:42](#) Literal paternalism there.
- Anthony Comegna: [14:43](#) Yes. Yeah. And of course from the monarch to the heads of household and there's this great body politic that is represented by the king. And Locke was really tackling all of that, and in the process paving the way for a lot of other things like feminism and other attacks on this idea that some people have a right to dictate others' behavior.
- Bill Glod: [15:08](#) Right.
- Anthony Comegna: [15:12](#) But at the same time, Locke was supporting slavery and he was drawing up old world style governments in the new world and supporting the new corporatism and all this other stuff, he was a paternalist too. It seems to me a little bit like when you admit one of the principles here, the rest just tumble into place.
- Bill Glod: [15:34](#) Yeah.
- Anthony Comegna: [15:35](#) And it's sort of you got the slippery slope problem. So nudging is something that you focus on a lot in the book, this idea of nudging sort of a libertarian paternalism.
- Bill Glod: [15:44](#) So actually, I don't really focus on nudging much in this book, that's probably what most people understand these days when they hear the term paternalism. But I actually focus more on good old fashioned coercive paternalism backed by laws and regulations. I have written elsewhere about nudging though, if anyone's interested. I think in this context, nudging isn't as much of a concern or focus because it still preserves people's freedom to make choices, bad choices, but it may have other concerns. There may be other concerns about it such as manipulation and things like that.
- Anthony Comegna: [16:14](#) So what do you think is the absolute best argument against sort of coercive paternalism then that you have here that you've presented?
- Bill Glod: [16:24](#) So I don't know if it's my best, but maybe just going back and looking at Hanna's reply about the objection from value and view imposition, I think I may have some teeth there. I think I may have something to say.
- Anthony Comegna: [16:40](#) But then, what about this problem where, "Well, what if people's value scales are actually so wildly different than we might assume?" This idea that again, we live in this liberal democracy and things like torturing puppies just doesn't fly, and

so this bizarre value just simply doesn't matter anymore. But I'm wondering, well, people can have lots of bizarre views, and maybe on balance the bizarre views actually win when you sort of count them up among the population.

Bill Glod: [17:11](#) So this is kind of in the background, but I think there has to be some degree of idealization, modest idealization of people's belief. It can't just be any old belief they have counts as equal. If you think by torturing puppies that you can save the world or something, well you're just wrong.

Anthony Comegna: [17:26](#) Is there any set up of values a person could have that would make paternalism as a sort of a social system work and make it good and justifiable?

Bill Glod: [17:38](#) So there's people who think this, for example, people who are like, "God tells us so, that's why we want you to do this," because maybe I can't prove it to you, but God tells us so. I don't find those arguments particularly compelling because people of all different kinds of beliefs throughout history have always believed that they had the truth on their side. And well, they can't all be right. Most of them have to be wrong.

Bill Glod: [18:00](#) But interestingly to contrast that, most paternalists today, for instance, they defend subjective values. Subjective views of welfare, typically in terms of the satisfaction of informed preferences. So they also admit that we need to be able to not just take any person's preferences, whatever it is, as-is, right? That we need to maybe be able to identify whether that preference actually is a reflection of true beliefs or at least beliefs that are intelligible, right? If they're not intelligible, then we may have a problem getting ... it's a nonstarter perhaps.

Bill Glod: [18:34](#) But anyway, I think that paternalists today are wise to do so if they want to brand themselves as liberals, if they want to be sincerely saying, "Look, I'm trying to give you people who like liberal democratic institutions, as do we, an argument for why you should not support such a wide scope of freedom as you might do." So as for, "God tells us so," maybe that kind of talk could fly in a theocracy but not in a liberal democracy.

Anthony Comegna: [19:01](#) This is kind of why liberalism got going in the first place, right? John Locke, right?

Bill Glod: [19:07](#) Yeah.

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- Anthony Comegna: [19:08](#) Yeah. Filmer is trying to justify the existence of kings and Locke says, "Well, that's all you're doing is you're just trying to justify the status quo."
- Bill Glod: [19:16](#) We have this thing called individual conscience that seems to be pretty important, right?
- Anthony Comegna: [19:20](#) But then his ... I'm sorry to fixate on Locke here, but I just kind of can't stand him as a historical figure because his response to monarchy is to say, "Well, we have to have some way to justify government. We have to come up with some stable, reliable, reasonable way to justify this institution so it can continue to tell people what to do and how to live their lives," and all of this.
- Bill Glod: [19:42](#) Right. And the question is really, why should we need this in the first place, if we do?
- Anthony Comegna: [19:45](#) Exactly. And yet, some people will answer the question not with God, but with some other romantic concept like the nation, right?
- Bill Glod: [19:54](#) Yeah. Deliberative democracy.
- Anthony Comegna: [19:56](#) Yeah. Yeah, right. There's some idea over and apart from ourselves that we should be pursuing, whether it's Nazi Germany or just sort of the idea of social democracy and perfecting our institutions or whatever.
- Bill Glod: [20:09](#) So I think in Locke's case, we need to maybe make a distinction between the principles that he uses to justify individual freedom, and then whether he just doesn't apply his own principles consistently. There's a distinction between maybe what he's arguing in principle is correct, but then he's not following through on his own premises, and it's like, "Okay, well now he's not extending the same consideration to other races or slaves," and things like that. Or just assuming that monarchy is the form of government to go with.
- Bill Glod: [20:38](#) And that could just be a case of his own inconsistency. You could say the same about really any philosopher. Kant, you could say Mill as well, other big key figures in the liberal tradition, they just don't live up all the time to their own fundamental premises.
- Bill Glod: [20:55](#) But going quickly back to contemporary defenders of paternalism, the best ones I noticed, they take pains to argue

why we should endorse some range of paternalistic laws by our own lights, by our own reasons, beliefs, and values. Now I don't think they succeed, but I think that's the right way to go if you want to try, if you want to convince more people.

- Anthony Comegna: [21:15](#) So it's not necessarily effective anymore maybe to appeal to God, like you said, theocracy's done, let's hope at least.
- Bill Glod: [21:23](#) Yeah. Yeah. Well it's-
- Anthony Comegna: [21:25](#) The nation has kind of a bad rap by now if you're going to talk about it explicitly.
- Bill Glod: [21:30](#) Right, right, right. And I can't rule out the possibility that there's some objective moral or ethical capital T truth out there, and maybe some experts even know it right now as we speak and are sincerely expressing that. But I think the further question is, how do they know they're the knowers? And more importantly, how do the rest of us know that they are the knowers, right? Even if they have the truth. So it's an epistemic question more than a metaphysical one, and I think things would start to look a lot different in that world.
- Bill Glod: [22:02](#) Maybe liberalism itself would become obsolete, right? Maybe it's just not the context in which liberal institutions could flourish. But that's if such a brave new world is preferable to what we have now, but until those moral priests convince us to follow them, it still has to go through us, right? Or until we can be convinced that being mind-controlled by such experts if possible, if that's morally better than being fallible moral agents ourselves who are susceptible to making bad choices, I think the better approach is to try asking what incentives people face given the constraints they are under. So yeah, I sort of take liberalish institutions as our going concern here, as our starting point.
- Anthony Comegna: [22:46](#) Yeah. So then it sounds to me like you would also be skeptical of, for example, let's posit and an all-knowing, all-powerful kind of AI that at least appears that way to us.
- Bill Glod: [22:58](#) Yeah.
- Anthony Comegna: [22:58](#) And its rule is to enforce Google's slogan, don't do evil or don't be evil, whatever it is, which still sounds kind of ominous.
- Bill Glod: [23:12](#) We have an omnipotent omniscient being who's tasked with not being evil, I don't know. Unintended consequences here?

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- Anthony Comegna: [23:20](#) So you said, if this brave new world is preferable, why might it not be preferable? If it was possible, wouldn't it definitely be preferable?
- Bill Glod: [23:30](#) I guess it depends upon what you consider a valuable life to consist in, and I think sort of the theme surrounding this book is that it's better to be fallible but achieve your own goals than to have someone else do it for you.
- Anthony Comegna: [23:43](#) Ah, see. Now that again sounds in its way a little bit like the liberal romance.
- Bill Glod: [23:50](#) It may be romance, but-
- Anthony Comegna: [23:51](#) You and I are living according to some script that we're not really choosing for ourselves. We just want to be free, man.
- Bill Glod: [23:57](#) [crosstalk 00:23:57] now.
- Anthony Comegna: [23:59](#) Yeah. Yeah. I don't know. I don't know.
- Bill Glod: [24:02](#) Yeah. And also, what I should say is, I'm not claiming that everybody holds this view, I'm saying it's a conception of the good that some people hold, and that I think conserve to tell against paternalistic rationales for coercion. People who hold those sets of values can defeat coercion based on those considerations because they don't share those considerations and it would be an imposition, a true imposition on them to say, "Well nonetheless, you must live as I say."
- Bill Glod: [24:25](#) So let's go back to this AI example, it's intriguing. Let's say that the AI somehow discovers these moral truths. That's a whole big debate in philosophy as to whether moral truths even exist, got to put that one aside. It's kind of a big thing, but let's just say that there are moral truths and that these AI machines discover them, and the supreme moral truth that they hand down to us, us middling people, is that the best thing you can do in life, morally, in terms of a good life, whatever, is eat oatmeal while wearing a gorilla suit.
- Bill Glod: [25:03](#) Now let's say they are absolutely right about that, but we don't know that. We think they're trolling us at first, right? Because we can't identify with their prescription because it doesn't run through our own judgment and our own conscience. You could have all the great moral truths in the world, they might have truthiness and all that, but unless we can integrate them into our own values intelligibly it's really not a moral life at all then.

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- Bill Glod: [25:28](#) And even if we go so far as to, okay, put on our gorilla suits and eat oatmeal, we're like, "Why the hell are we doing this?" It does not resonate. We don't identify with it. So there's a distinction between maybe the truth status of moral claims and our ability to integrate them into our motivation.
- Anthony Comegna: [25:43](#) So then agency is really a key central part?
- Bill Glod: [25:46](#) Yeah, absolutely. I think agency plays a big deal.
- Anthony Comegna: [25:49](#) It seems to be kind of what ethics is.
- Bill Glod: [25:51](#) Yeah. If you are familiar at all with Nozick's example of the experience machine, it's sort of similar kinds of things. Nozick argues, "Well, we don't value merely experiences." We value experiences, but that's not all that we value. We like to be agents, we like to have a causal role in how things unfold, and then we can experience that as well, all the good things that may come out of that. But we still want some skin in the game.
- Anthony Comegna: [26:15](#) So what would you like readers to take away with them from your book or what do you personally hope to accomplish with it?
- Bill Glod: [26:23](#) Great question. So what would I like to accomplish with it? So first of all, shameless plug, it is available for advance order, it should be out sometime in May, but the Routledge website paperbacks are available at a discounted rate of \$20. So there you go, there's my pitch. So it'll be an affordable paperback and I'd love for it to reach a much wider audience than books on this topic typically reach. A lot of these books are written for scholarly audiences, they sell for \$120 at a press that ends up selling maybe 10 copies, right? I want to be able to reach a wider audience.
- Bill Glod: [26:59](#) Now I'm not going to kid myself and think it could become a bestseller like Nudge, but I hope that it reaches students and general readers interested in the topic. I hope it allows them to think about things in a new way, helps them to think about their own lives and the choices that they make or shouldn't make, right? So this book is not called Why It's Always OK to Make Bad Choices, just to be clear about that. I think there are some bad choices and you shouldn't make them, but maybe you would want the freedom to make them is really my main theme.
- Bill Glod: [27:26](#) But I hope those who strongly disagree, maybe they'll throw it across the room, but then pick it up later and re-engage, okay?

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Because even anger, that's a sign I was touching a nerve, I'm getting somebody to think about stuff, and whether you end up agreeing with any of the points or not, well that's up to your judgment, your agency. So I want it to be challenged because I may be wrong.

Bill Glod: [27:51](#)

So the final thing I want, I want to sell it at airports. It's always been a dream of mine. I've always wanted to write a book, but I want it to sell at airports, and I think that would be a hoot to have my book up there in the newsstand next to Stephen King. So, one can dream.

Anthony Comegna: [28:08](#)

And there you have it, everyone. Leave each other alone more often. Stop nudging each other around and just be for a while. I loved Bill's concluding note about agency and in the interest of consistency then, I'll refrain from telling you to use your choice-making powers to rate and review the show. There's always next week.