

The Life of a Twenty-something

by

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Most of the people in their early twenties that I have met seem not to know what to do with their professional lives. They seem to be lost in the vast range of opportunities that they can pick from. This paper focuses on 'the' reasons why these 'twenty-somethings' might feel this way and how they might solve this issue.

From Stability to Instability back to Stability



Illustration 1: Do what the teacher says

Let's start by taking a general perspective on the life of a twenty-something. The issue of what occupation to choose is by no means the only issue a twenty-something has to deal with. In general the following statement holds: being a twenty-something is a transition-phase in life; a transition from stability, through instability, back to stability.

For the first part of her (I will say 'her' instead of 'him/her' in this paper) life, the twenty-something-to-be didn't have the freedom to choose whatever she believed was best; at least not concerning 'big' matters. It were her parents that took the decisions for her. They were the ones deciding what kindergarten, primary school, high school and – in some cases even – university their child would attend. And, within each of these educational institutions, the space to manoeuvre was again limited. There were fixed programmes any child had to attend. Resistance would have been futile, since the child's opinion regarding these matters was considered mostly irrelevant. The twenty-something-to-be was aware of her limited capacity to change the *status*

quo, therefore suppressing her need to reflect on her situation.

But it was not only regarding her education that this (apparent) lack of control over her life had arisen. Decisions of where to live, what sports and musical instruments to play, and of course financial issues, were mostly if not exclusively handled by the parents. It was only when the twenty-something-to-be began attending university that freedom rose its head. And it is here that the trouble starts. Because although freedom in itself is not what troubles the twenty-something-to-be, its counterpart – named ‘responsibility’ – is what makes her tremble. It is the responsibility for the consequences of her own actions that leaves her in a state of apathy. Now *she* has to take the decisions that up till that point in her life were made by everyone but her.

This phase of by times close to existential doubt ends when the twenty-something has again gained long-term stability in her live. Like being child, becoming a member of the working class implies the familiar presence of fixed rules and the limited need for self-reflection. Having made a choice of what occupation to pursue, and the act of actually pursuing this occupation, makes the twenty-something become immersed into a new institutional structure, making her rest in the faith of having found certainty after a very uncertain period in her life.

From Farmer to Professor



Illustration 2: You don't have to become a farmer

Many twenty-somethings seem to feel lost in the sense that they totally do not know what profession to choose after finishing their studies. What more can we say about this sense of 'being lost'? The first thing we could notice is that the feeling of being lost seems to be a defining characteristic of what it means to be a twenty-something: it is a property that, by default, is present in every twenty-something's 'set of basic characteristics'. Given that it is a defining characteristic, it is reasonable to assume that this feeling of being lost among twenty-somethings has been around forever. But is this actually true?

When I asked people in their fifties whether they knew what to do profession-wise when they were in their early twenties, they mostly replied negatively. However, when I asking the same question to my grandparents, they replied positively. They said, 'Well, we didn't really have a choice about what kind of job to do.' My grandfather told to me that he grew up in a farmer's family and that from a very early age it was more or less 'obvious' that he would become a farmer himself. My grandmother, the eldest girl of thirteen children, was at the age of fourteen forced to quit her studies so that she could assist her mum in managing the ever-growing household. 'But', I asked my grandmother, 'was there no-one in your family that attended university?' 'Yes, one of us did', she said, '*He had the talent to do so.*' My grandmother assured me that this scarcity in attending university was very common among families in those days.

So it seems that the feeling of being lost as it is experienced by so many twenty-somethings today is in fact a relatively new phenomenon. That is to say that until two generations ago this feeling wasn't widely shared among people in their early twenties. And the reason for this, as my grandparents already alluded too, seems quite obvious: people didn't *effectively* have a choice regarding what to do with their lives. I say 'lives' instead of 'professional lives' since also regarding

other matters in life (religion and to a lesser extent marriage) the autonomy of twenty-somethings appeared to be limited. One could of course reply by saying that, in principle, my grandparents still had the option to deviate from what was expected of them. Assuming that they would have had the financial means to do so (which they didn't) they could in principle indeed have done so. But in practice, given the social norms and values they were either explicitly or implicitly discouraged from pursuing higher education.

Nowadays, the societies we grow up in is organized in a manner that is fundamentally different from the society of (let's say) 70 years ago. Today, in contrast to two generations ago, the financial resources required for attending university are available to almost anyone who has the capacity and the desire to attend university. Scholarships, government-funded studies, cheap loans and financially affluent parents are among the prime factors that have drastically reduced the chance of being unable to fund one's higher education.

Next to a shift in the financing of studies, also a society-wide 'mental' shift seems to have taken place. This shift is easily recognized by taking a look at an arbitrary high school; a child who receives a certificate that allows him to continue his studies at a university is nowadays frowned upon if he decides not to do so. And this too seems to be a relatively new phenomenon. Whereas two generations ago a farmer-son would by default become a farmer as well *unless* he had very good reasons not to do so, nowadays a farmer-son by default attends university *unless* he has very good reasons not to do so. This mental shift might be due to changes in our educational system; an system in which any child goes through a university-preparing teaching scheme, thereby maximizing their chance to attend university.

Note also that the financial- and mental shift might very well be interdependent: a shift in outlook towards children's education might cause a change in educational funding, and *vice versa*.

Opportunities, opportunities, opportunities



Illustration 3: Where do you want to work?

But attending university is in itself no reason to become clueless about what kind of job to pursue. So explaining why it is that many more children today attend university than two generations ago does not explain why these teenagers feel (professionally) lost when they reach their twenties.

Although not a direct cause of 'apathy' among so many twenty-somethings, one thing is for sure: attending university provides anyone with the potential to have more choices regarding what kind of job to pursue. By attending university, the twenty-something knows that – without even looking at the labour market – she will be eligible for more occupations than she was before entering her studies. This fact implies that, when the twenty-something finally settles on a job, there will be more occupations (compared to her not having done her studies) she could have chosen but didn't. It is the possibility that later in life she might reflect upon her life and think 'I could have

chosen better' that could be part of the explanation of the apathy. And since, due to the aforementioned reasoning, this possibility has increased over the decades, so has the apathy among twenty-somethings.

Another consequence of education that isn't necessary obvious is that over the course of her education the twenty-something's interests might change; that is, the occupations/sciences the twenty-something finds interesting before embarking on her studies might not seem to be so interesting anymore when she reaches the end of her educational process. For example: the twenty-something might very well finish her first year of university wanting to become a business-consultant, only realizing after finishing her second year (which included courses in philosophy) that she is much more passionate about philosophy. Now, it is not the *change* in what she considers to be interesting that makes the twenty-something doubt about what kind of profession to pursue, as much as having experienced that whatever it is that she finds interesting can in fact change. And the idea that – as in education – she could choose a job that she likes now but that she might not like anymore in the future only increases her uncertainty regarding what job she choose.

Education is merely one of the factors making a twenty-something doubt her occupational choice; it is the part that transforms them from 'the inside out'. Now, let's take a look at how the outside world (i.e., the world external to the twenty-something) contributes to the doubts held by the 21st century twenty-something.

There are a number of reasons due to the outside world why twenty-somethings nowadays have such a hard time deciding what occupation to choose. First of all, because of the ever-increasing

specialization, there are nowadays many more occupations the twenty-something has to choose from than there were two generations ago. Whereas in the past there might not have been (many) alternatives next to becoming a farmer, nowadays there are literally thousands and thousands of occupations she *has to* (not only can) choose from, and each of these occupations is again partitioned into many areas of specialization.

Also, because of globalization and the prominence of the internet, many barriers have been taken away that could have prevented the twenty-something from 20 years ago from doing whatever it was that she wanted to do. There is no excuse anymore for not starting a business or not working at a big firm on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Hence there is nothing but the twenty-something's own courage to withhold her from pursuing her aspirations; a scary thought. To exemplify this, let's return briefly to the case of my grandmother. It was clear to her that, after assisting her mum, she would marry a farmer and take care of his household. She might not have liked having few options about what 'job' to pursue, but that was simply the way it was. However, a positive side effect resulting from her having limited options was that she was ripped of the responsibility to decide what her future would (not) come to look like. It is in this sense that she might have been lucky to have been saved of the daunting soul-searching process so many twenty-somethings today are forced to go through.

Options



Illustration 4: So many choices

I have mentioned the word 'options' more than once. I dare to say that most people believe that having options is a good thing. Certain philosophers even claim that autonomy (as in having the freedom to decide what one's life goals are, how to pursue them and whether or not to actually pursue them) is intrinsically valuable. This is a conviction I do not necessarily share, an issue I will return to later on.

Like anything, having options only becomes an problem if one faces *too* many options. And I believe this is exactly the issue the twenty-somethings of today are facing. The aforementioned factors such as the specialization, the internet and globalization have drastically increased the number of career-options the twenty-something could potentially fulfil; they have increased them to such an extent, that she – being the rationally bounded creature that she (as any human being) necessarily is – is both physically and mentally unable to overview all of them, let alone compare each option to each other option. Although impossible, the latter is required in order to make an optimal decision. After all, how can the twenty-something know whether she has made the best choice if she hasn't considered/compared all options?

Next to there being too many options, there might be options that are fundamentally incomparable because the values they allow one to achieve are not 'convertible to the same currency'. Think about the choice between becoming a charity worker and becoming an investment banker. The first job might be better in terms of helping those who need help; the second might be better in terms of maximally utilizing one's intellectual capabilities. But which one of these criteria is most important, and why? And how much more important? These are questions that do not have an obvious (if any) answer.

Back to the claim that having options (or being autonomous) is a good thing. I do not necessarily agree with this. Let us return to the farmer's son (my grandfather) example. Given that the farmer's son knows that he has no real option but to become a farmer, he is likely to never experience the level of regret, or the apathy that is caused by the prospect of regret, from it that today's twenty-something could face. When we analyse the farmer's son situation, and come to see that his only 'option' is to become a farmer, we tend to feel sorry for him. It seems like having only one option is really not having an option at all, making it look more like an act of coercion than an act of free will, contradicting the autonomy many of us find so valuable. However, due to this same lack of options, the farmer's son will have no alternative but to rest in his faith. He simply cannot do anything to alter his situation, so the only option he faces is to either accept it or to resist his situation. The latter seems a rather obvious choice, especially if he – like most of us – wants to maximize his happiness.

Now today's twenty-something. It is almost impossible for her to rest in her faith since, due to her autonomy, she is faced with a never-ending string of opportunities. This makes it very difficult for her to be satisfied with one option in particular. After all, it is very likely that, among all those opportunities out there, there is one that would be preferred to this one, if only she would find (or would have found) it. It is the idea hereof that will leave her in a perpetual state of downgrading the options that are effectively available to her and thereby her happiness. So even though the twenty-something of today has more autonomy than the farmer's son of two generations ago, it does not follow from this that the twenty-something will be happier than the farmer's son. This points to what I believe to be an important observation: more choices doesn't necessarily imply more happiness.

Intuition

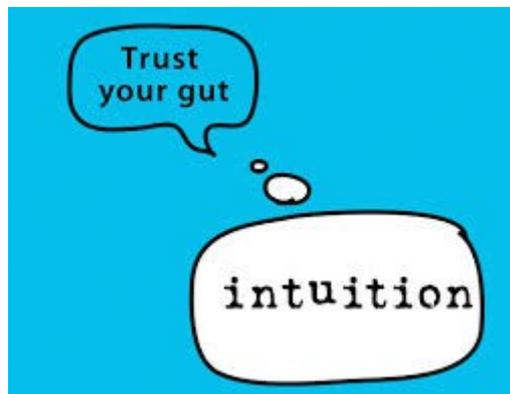


Illustration 5: We have to trust our intuition

In the last section we have stumbled upon a non-trivial observation. Namely, because of the vastness of the opportunities the twenty-something faces, and her limitedly rational capacities, rationality alone cannot suffice in making her choose the 'best' option. Thus she has to make use of different means.

Even though it seems impossible for any twenty-something to make the optimal decision regarding what occupation to choose, one thing is for sure: she has to make a decision. Even deciding not to pursue a career is in fact a choice, and therefore has to be ranked against all other options available. Since it proves to be impossible to compare all occupations in terms of how well they do on all of relevant criteria, the twenty-something has to make use of a 'selection device' that pre-selects a subset of the set of all occupations. This is required in order to make it possible for the twenty-something to compare each member of this smaller set to each other based upon how well they fare with regard to the relevant criteria. By doing this, she might be able to find a 'local maximum'; that is, the best job given this limited set of jobs.

Assuming that the twenty-something does not want to just randomly pick some occupations in order to compare them to each other, she has to come up with a set of criteria that she considers to be most important. Based on these criteria she can limit the set of occupations to those that do best in terms of fulfilling these criteria. But this is impossible because of both the problem of the incomparability of criteria and because this still requires her to compare *all* alternatives with respect to how well they do in terms of the most important criteria; this was just the situation we were trying to avoid.

So no matter what she does, rationality cannot guide her to 'the best' occupation. The answer must come from something 'non-rational' or 'irrational', although I find the latter term misleading as I will explain later. The non-rational answer, on the basis of which the twenty-something might be able to execute her rational machinery, should make clear to her on a fundamental level what she finds valuable and what not; that is, it should provide her with her most basic wants. These basic wants must come from a place within the twenty-something that holds the instantiating power to all her actions. Let's call this place 'the unconscious mind'.

But its instantiating or basic power comes at a cost: the place is inaccessible for the conscious mind. And since rationality resides within the conscious mind, neither is it accessible by rational deliberation. Thus it seems we are finally out of the 'rationality' circle. Now, although the unconscious mind is not accessible to us, its 'output' is. Its output is what we call 'intuition' and manifests itself through those inexplicable feelings of something just 'feeling good' or 'feeling bad'. Although our intuition doesn't come with any reason for why it is that something feels 'good' or 'bad', it does something that is at least as important by providing us with the values we need to

choose what we want.

Intuition in practice



Illustration 6: We cannot comprehend all the pros and cons

Since intuition is 'non-rational', it cannot 'communicate' through thoughts; it communicates solely through feelings. But how should the twenty-something go about interpreting these feelings? How to know what feelings will lead her in the right direction and which ones in the wrong direction? The answer is simple: through trial and error.

There are various reasons for why trial and error seems to be the best – if not the only – way for the twenty-something to go about finding the 'best' occupation. As I alluded to before, the twenty-something is not born with both a fixed set of desires; neither with a fixed set of capabilities. Throughout her (educational) life she, for whatever reason, might decide on developing certain capabilities (e.g., playing piano or doing mathematics). Parallel to these developments in skill she will develop a corresponding level of interest in the act of practising these skills.

What is true for the development of interest is just as true for the development of disinterest. Only

through practising the occupation can the twenty-something become aware of the fact that a certain occupation is not what she likes most. The development of disinterest for occupations is just as important for the twenty-something to make her choice about what occupation to choose than is the development of interest in occupations. After all, it is only through comparing various levels of enjoyment that she can consider some better than others.

This observation leads us to the following conclusion: the twenty-something has to engage in activities in order to obtain a preference for (some of) them. Since she lacks an absolute sense of what it is that she likes most, she will not *a priori* (that is, before undertaking any action) be able to know what occupation suits her best. It is because of this conclusion that the twenty-something's feeling of 'don't-knowing-what-to-do' might be an indicator of the fact that she has spent too much time looking for a non-existent absolute preference ranking ('soul-searching', as one might call it) and too little time engaging in activities.

This also points to what might be the solution to the twenty-something's apathy. Namely, by engaging in different subject areas or occupations, the twenty-something both *creates* as well as *experiences* her preference towards the respective subject areas/occupations. Now, knowing the importance of action over thinking saves her from engaging in an act of obsessive self-reflection that is destined *not* to settle on a set of preferences. It is only through action that interest (and its consequence called 'fulfilment') is both created and experienced.

'But', the twenty-something might ask, 'when do I know when to stop the trial-and-error process? Surely not when I have stumbled upon an option that I prefer to another option, since, by having only two options, I will always be able to develop a preference for one of them relative to the

other. Therefore, the fact that I might prefer one to the other is no indication of the fact that there no 'better' options around.' Now, it is here again that intuition comes into play. Assuming that the twenty-something's intuition, and thus her ability to stop the trial-and-error process at a satisfying moment, is the culmination of an evolutionary process spanning over thousands of generations, the idea that her intuition should at least give her a reasonably satisfying answer to this question is not unwarranted. It is her belief in evolutionary biology and the resulting conditioning by means of feelings of fulfilment and punishment that can guide the twenty-something in making a satisfying decision.

Also, from an economical point of view, the act of finding a satisfying occupation is just an ordinary cost-benefit analysis. Given the inevitable diminishing marginal utility of the effort put into the trial-and-error process, surely a point will be reached at which the twenty-something's hope of finding the optimal occupation and her satisfaction with her currently preferred option cancel out.

Next to developing her preferences, the act of practising capabilities also shows the twenty-something her relative ability in practising these capabilities. An example would be that of someone who, having compared her capabilities, finds herself to be relatively good in practising a certain subject area (e.g., mathematics). Note that this refers to her ability to perform a certain capability in comparison to *her other* capabilities.

After looking solely at her own capabilities, the twenty-something can decide to look at her abilities compared to those of others. Based on this observation, she can might get an idea of the field in which she could potentially make the greatest contribution to society. The latter is obviously beneficial for society. However, it is just as much beneficial for the twenty-something

herself, since it is because of the fact that knowing that she does what she is best at – both in terms of her own capabilities as well as compared to others – that any negative feelings that she could experience by questioning the maximum usage of her capacities will be minimized.

A nice feature of the twenty-something looking to find her relatively best ability is that she is guaranteed to find one. Even those who are negatively minded and have a tendency to downgrade their own capabilities are at least sure to have a least bad capability; the latter is obviously – as a more positively minded person would put it – their best capability. Also, the development of preferences for activities and the development of the capabilities required for performing these activities tend to reinforce each other. That is, the activities the twenty-something likes are often the ones she is good at, and the activities she is good at will often be the ones she will come to like.

This is well understandable from an evolutionary perspective; it is, with regard to one's survival in a group, beneficial for one's own well-being to perform those activities one is good at. If one would not this, her contribution to the group's results will be considered to be poor and she will run the risk of retribution and/or exclusion from the group, both of which are obviously negative to her survival prospects. Therefore, as a reinforcing mechanism, our brains tend to send us positive signals when we do what we're good at. These signals cause what we call our preferences. The positive signals tend to make us perform the corresponding activities more often, thereby increasing the likelihood of us developing required capabilities.

The rationality of being non-rational

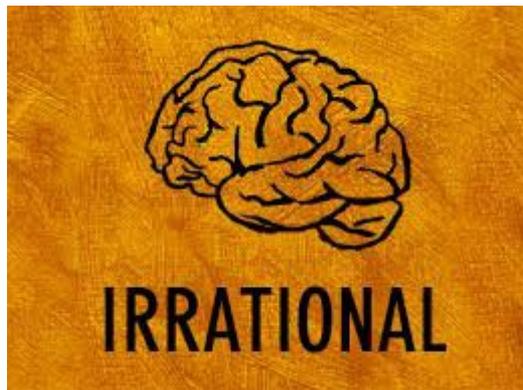


Illustration 7: Being irrational is rational

During the course of this paper, we have established that rationality alone does not suffice in letting us choose a satisfying occupation. In order to come to such an occupation, a 'non-rational' element must be introduced into the choosing-process. But somehow we seem to have a problem with our choices being (partially) determined by a non-rational element. It might very well be that, in this 21th world we are living in, rationality is put on a pedestal and everything non-rational (including intuition) is considered to be a source of errors, leading us astray from our objectives. We are taught to ignore our intuition wherever possible; at least when there are more 'rational' arguments at hand. This might be due to the fact that non-rational factors are beyond our control, thereby making us to some extent a slave towards our feelings, thus decreasing our perceived autonomy. But one could ask oneself the question: what is the value of being in control if your 'controlled' life doesn't cohere with your intuitions? What if letting go of control is required in order to explore the full range of opportunities, thereby unlocking the door behind which the realm of unexplored activities reside? What if the latter is required in order to obtain a more complete preference ranking?

If any, the message of this paper is that value cannot be rationally constructed. The ways in which

what we value might be achieved can be rationally constructed, but the value as such comes from a domain that is distinct from any rational – or even conscious – part of ourselves. Although this might be difficult to accept for any person who is taught to think carefully about any choices made in life, it is a prerequisite for embarking on any rational process: first you have to accept what you value in order to try and set out a path to reach that which you value.

Therefore one could say that being non-rational is a prerequisite for being rational. If one doesn't allow oneself to act on non-rational impulses, one has no basis on which to cast the rational power, thereby excluding the possibility of doing that which one might value. And isn't that what we all want to do? Doing what we value? If so, we might as well embrace the non-rational and even consider it to be a rational thing to do.

Love



Illustration 8: What is love?

In this last section I want to look at another potential source of uncertainty for any twenty-

something: love. Being in-between the period of life in which love was irrelevant and the part in life in which love is deemed to be a relic of the past (or to put it more positive: has changed into mutual compassion), there is this period in which the twenty-something is likely to feel the need to find a future life partner.

But what is love? What characteristics does the twenty-something's future partner need to have? Are the negative aspects of the relationship she is currently having likely to fade away over time? Or are they are structural component of the chemistry she is (not) having with her current partner? And how to distinguish between the two? If she would end the relationship now, would it leave her forever with a feeling of deep regret for having let this opportunity pass by? Or will it – in retrospect – prove to be a milestone on her way to finding that perfect partner with whom she will spend the rest of her life?

These are questions that any twenty-something is likely to ask herself at a certain point in time. It seems to be the case that most people get married around the age of 30, often being the culmination of a relationship that is underway for at least four years. A quick calculation shows that, assuming the latter to be true, the twenty-something should meet her life partner no later than the age of 25. And the more her age approaches this age, the stronger becomes the twenty-something's doubt regarding the status of her current relationship; or, if she doesn't currently have a partner, the stronger gets the urge to find that potential life partner.

However, the great problem with any romantic relationship is that only in retrospect can be decided whether or not it has been a good decision to continue the relationship. It might be the case that, at this point in time, the twenty-something and her partner might experience struggles

that will grow larger and larger as time goes by. But the question of whether these struggles are merely obstacles to overcome on the road to living happily ever after, or that they are symptoms of a profound mismatch between her and her partner's personality, is impossible to answer up front. And here too it seems that only intuition can guide the way, since the experiences that could provide the twenty-something with the relevant information lie in the future and thus are (for now; the moment she is always living in) beyond her experience.