

It's More Than Just Willpower

It breaks my heart every time I pass someone sleeping in the street. I go through a mental process, wondering what circumstances, preferences, and choices get a person to a spot where sleeping on the sidewalk is better than the next best alternative.

I do not want to deny free will. It's possible there's a homeless person somewhere who thinks my life is miserable and theirs is better. It seems more likely nobody really wants to sleep on the sidewalk, but somehow they get to a place where that seems better or easier than whatever would be needed to sleep indoors.

I think about my own life. There are a lot of things I experience that I don't really want to experience, but I lack the creativity, willpower, or knowledge needed to make choices that would help me avoid those experiences. I'm always living sub-optimally in some way. It's always a combination of circumstances and choices. I'm always choosing at least a little less than what I know would be best, and sometimes a lot.

I've had mostly good incentive structures around me. In part from circumstances I was born into, in part from those I've created. To the extent that the incentive structures are good, my behavior and outcomes are good. When those structures are neutral or bad, my choices typically follow.

I think willpower can be built over time, such that a person who's learned to make good, tough choices gets better at it. But in the beginning, and at the individual point of choosing, I don't think any two humans are that different. We seek our self interest as defined by our subjective preferences given our current information, resources, and understanding. Those variables of preference, information, resources, and understanding are the elements of the incentive structure.

I try to find, cultivate, and stay in good incentive structures because I know that without them, my choices are capable of leading me somewhere I don't want to go.

So much for me. What about the people still sleeping on the street? I don't know. That's probably why my attention turns to my own life pretty quickly. It's something I can work with and control at least to some extent. I don't know what to do for them. That's part of the heartbreak.