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William Roth

State University of New York, Albany

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DAY CARE: A SPECTRUM OF ISSUES AND POLICY OPTIONS

William Roth
Associate Professor
School of Social Welfare
State University of New York at Albany

ABSTRACT

Currently, debates about the merits of one form or another of day care frequently miss some significant issues and hence some of the important policy options may be ruled out or in for the wrong reasons. Here, child day care is layed on a spectrum one end of which offers maximum market freedom in the form of income redistribution, a negative income tax, children's allowance, or other transfer assistance, to be spent on the market if so desired for day care services, and on the other end of the spectrum a system of comprehensive child day care centers. In between are various mixtures of the two and various special blends like voucher systems. Hopefully, by so arraying the issues and discussing them certain similarities between antipoverty and child care policy become evident and certain problems of transfers in cash or provision in kind can be clarified. Various day care policy options are discussed in relationship to assumptions that they make about cost, theories of child development, definitions of universality, the preference of parents, returns to scale, economic rationality, market responsiveness, quality, consumer democracy, and citizen control. Finally three central issues which lie outside of this analysis, freedom, political environment, and the target group to whom day care should be directed are discussed. In this discussion the point is made that day care is best conceived of as directed toward mothers not toward children or families. It is the mother who is most in need of the benefit of day care policy most of the time and to whom reasonable policy of day care should be directed. This consideration quite alters what seem fairly reasonable conclusions in favor of market day care in favor of day care by voucher or by direct service.

At first blush day care appears simple: provide care for the day for pre-school children. This simplicity is deceptive; here I hope to illuminate some issues around day care. In fact, day care is not univocally directed toward the welfare of children but has many goals.

In some uncertain measure it is directed toward the welfare of families, the welfare of women, and the welfare of society. And like most policies, it is redistributive, frequently explicitly so.

To help in organizing some reflections on day care, I shall consider not what is but what might be* on a spectrum whose colors are different degrees of market freedom or political voice or, to use a slightly different language, of increasing/decreasing degrees of market control and of decreasing/increasing degrees of political control.** Two models of national policies for child care can be thought of as anchoring down the ends of this spectrum of the ideal. These are a comprehensive system of universal child care centers and a children's allowance.

Code words like "day care", "child care", "developmental day care", "universal day care", "compensatory day care", "Head Start" tell little. Slogans like "equality of opportunity" or "Sovietizing of American families" tell less. Child care has many labels and slogans which tell little about the proposed program if much about the advocate. Mapping programs on a spectrum provide one first step through labels and slogans into cost, effect, benefits, and structures useful in thinking about any future child care policy.

The level at which any day care policy is funded - current level, modest level, high level - is a crucial variable lying orthogonal to the variables of market freedom and political control. It gives the

*Talking about what might be is both easier and harder than talking about what is. It is surely easier to talk about ideas uncluttered by facts. This temptation is to be resisted. But that a policy does not exist in the realm of fact may make it a sort of natural theoretical ideal type offering analysis even though we realize the impending entanglements.

Talking about what might be is harder because such discourse inevitably involves values and sometimes we are at elaborate pains to claim that values do not exist for us. But policy analysis always involves consideration of values and how to achieve them; ethics becomes political theory as presumably policy analysis does not talk about things for the fun of it but with some purpose of their political institution.

**What follows in its small way owes some debt to Charles E. Lindblom's elegant work, Politics and Markets.

spectrum breadth spreading it from a line to a band. Perhaps given a high level of expenditure, a system of universal day care might be optimal whereas given a low level, a targeted program or children's allowance might be preferable. Of course, such a spectrum, even spread into a band, a rainbow, broken white light into color, does not show all we need to know. But it does show a little bit about some ideal policy and hopefully it exposes some issues, conflicts and similarities which may not otherwise be obvious. Consider then some assumptions which different sorts of day care policies would have to make.

Cost

Once upon a time, many of us yearned for a chicken in every pot. One economist's response to this yearning was the observation that there's no such thing as a free lunch.

Although in the long run child care may turn out to be a shrewd social and personal investment, in the short run it has to be paid for. This means taxes, near and dear to those of us from the adult world. All else equal, childless and "childed" couples pay the same taxes, the former getting no direct benefit, the latter getting all the direct benefit.

Sooner or later, and usually in between, most people have children, thus perhaps child care is more a social insurance. Social security, (in fact, a transfer of funds from working persons to the elderly), seems so self interestly reasonable since most of us count on an old age where we will reap the benefits our "premiums" (although sufficient poverty makes certainty dubious).

We all were children. Taxing one group to benefit another may appear quite different to the group paying and to the group benefiting if the groups are temporal transformations of the same group. Here again taxation looks like insurance, (perhaps undesired insurance, but insurance nonetheless) in a far surer sense than do various welfare plans which can be conceived of as insurance against poverty. While some rich today will be indeed poor tomorrow, such social mobility is the exception while travelling through life is the rule.

Thus day care looks like social security, unemployment insurance, medical insurance, pension plans, etc. But here, unlike most insurances, insurance is not for the future. A family is likely to spend the years after child bearing paying for day care in the past. It is insurance on the installment plan. Fly now, pay later.

Children while children, are an economic drain on the family although they pay off later - if not to the family, then to society. The economic drain of childhood may cause families - who through modern contraception have a choice-not to have as many children as is socially desirable. If so, day care which reduces the financial liability of having children, accounts for such externalities, being suitably pro-natalist.

While lunch may not be free, many of us may want to eat it; the cost of day care may be reasonable even if high. If indeed day care makes for happier children, less child abuse, better citizens, more community, and all the rest of the good things which some of us may expect from it, these benefits may outweigh the costs (which in the long run may appear far more reasonable than in the short run, in any event).

Aside from questions relevant to any sort of day care, there are assumptions unique to specific modes of delivery, special to different places on the spectrum. Consider briefly some assumptions behind the policy which anchors one end of the spectrum.

Child Development

Perhaps the image which goes with a universal system of child care centers is a Kindergarten in the literal sense of that word. Such a system would provide a vast and wholesome array of opportunities and services to the pre-school child including love, play, food, medical monitoring, the opportunities of socialization with peers under the guidance of the wise, experienced, and knowledgeable, and a general business and happiness.

Such a system usually assumes that child development technologies exist able to either replicate or improve upon the family. While it would be foolish to claim that we are utter fools in our knowledge of how children grow up, (sometimes called child development), it is certainly wisdom to reckon that we are not all wise and prudence to reckon that what we are programmed, genetically and culturally, to do in families we may not know how to do otherwise.

Universality

A universal child care system by definition would not be restricted to children who are poor, who are girls, who are white, who are disabled, but would be for all children. Universality seems in keeping with the spirit of childhood, with notions of social good, with the political perception that a system for all is less vulnerable than a system for the weak.

Yet, to so use the work "universal" is to abuse it. For one thing, we should probably not want a day care system for all children below school age, wishing perhaps to restrict it to children above the age of three months, eighteen months, three years, or whatever. The system is not universal with respect to age.

Do we want the same sort of day care provided for handicapped children as for their able bodied brothers and sisters? Certainly, we do not wish inferior day care. And current information suggests that various supplementary services may encourage the development of handicapped children. Perhaps we wish to supplement day care for able bodied children with extra "special" day care. Then which children are we to consider handicapped? Day care is not universal here either.

And what if we were to make the leap of faith required to believe in some sort of theory of cultural deprivation? Then probably we should reckon that certain children were more culturally deprived than others reasoning that what culture had taken away child care could replace. This is not thinking of all children. Universality in policy breaks hard against the fact of difference in recipients. Although universal programs may appear neat universal programs are seldom universal in fact.

Parental Preference I

If parents hated caring for their children and if others loved caring for them, that might well be a strong argument for some sort of child care. More probably the reverse is true. Presumably, some parents enjoy caring for children (especially their own children) and would reluctantly give up parental joys.

And presumably rich people would continue rich arrangements like governesses and au paire girls. Child care, like most public policies, is not for everyone. Not all people would use comprehensive child care facilities even if they existed.

A system of universal day care is take it or leave it. It is inaccurate to suppose its existence non-coercive for insofar as families are economically rational there would be a strong incentive to accept day care just as with free public education. There could indeed be private arrangements, just as today there are private and parochial schools. But these would be at an extra cost to a family already taxed for a system of day care.

Returns to Scale

A universal child care system probably assumes positive returns to scale in the child care business, it taking less than twice as much work to take care of two children as one and so forth. If, on the contrary, it were to take just as many or more people to give equivalent care to a child in a child care setting as it would in his or her family, then child care would make less sense unless there were other things that it had to contribute.

Control

Control of a system of comprehensive universal day care could be political, exercised by people in their role of citizen. Were the system sufficiently decentralized, people could exercise control by community board, cooperative participation, and numerous other options to make voices heard and perhaps listened to; were the system centralized, people could participate as lobby groups of concerned parents, concerned professionals, and the elected representatives of citizens might have a say in the structure of the system.

But citizenship involves time and effort, interest groups may not reflect the interests of children and parents, and it may be dangerous to rely on experts to make up the gap. Perhaps our system of public education is the best model of what a comprehensive system of day care would look like. Is control of this system beneficial? Is it democratic? Is it in the best interests of the child? Or do we want something else or something more? If so, it will require a degree of organizational and political thought unusual in this country since the Constitution.

There are other modes of control than the political. One is economic. A dollar here is a "vote" spent on this mode of day care or that or it can be kept to compensate for the cost incurred by being a parent and not working. Such policies exist at the other end of the spectrum. They involve little opportunity or necessity, at least at first glance, for political involvement as a citizen. They rather offer the opportunity for market choice as a consumer. At this end of the spectrum are policies which simply give people money to buy the sort of child care they wish on the market.

One way to transfer some money to some families with some strings attached is AFDC. A more reasonable policy for transferring money would

be a negative income tax, where people who earn a lot would pay a lot of taxes, people who earn less would pay no taxes, and people who earn very little would have money returned to them. Seemingly more related to poverty than children such a modification of the welfare system could have potentially immense consequences for day care by increasing family budgets at the bottom of the income distribution, making it easier to purchase day care of choice on the market.

A negative income tax would redistribute money from the well-to-do to the poor. In some part, the effects would be the same as transferring money from the childless to the childed. It would appear sufficiently different to appear to have few insurance aspects, making it less politic. But maybe a concatenation of concerns for equality, an awkward welfare system, and care for children would have sufficient political clout. Such a policy, redistributive and anti-poverty with seemingly little effect on children, in reality with immense effect on children, implies that much of what we mean when we talk of child care is access to more goods and services by poor people. Indeed, many examples commonly used to justify child care arrangements almost invariably better justify supplementing the income of those who are poor.

Another policy option which would provide cash to families in order to purchase day care on the market would be a children's allowance. Such a policy could offer a sufficiently large subsidy to pay for quality day care. And a children's allowance would have the same insurance aspects as a system of universal day care.

As there are arguments about the nature of the best sort of universal day care, so too are there arguments about the best sort of cash transfer. (Indeed, there are persuasive arguments for a negative income tax over a children's allowance.) I shall not consider such arguments here and in what follows shall consider the policy of a children's allowance as more nearly symmetrical with that of comprehensive day care and hence easier to talk about here than a negative income tax. (Most of what I shall have to say, however, is true about any system of income redistribution, including a negative income tax.)

Consider some questions involved with providing money to be freely spent on the market.

Rationality

A children's allowance (and a negative income tax) has assumptions just as does a system of comprehensive child care. Among these is that individual household will be rational in maximizing its utility using the additional money in whatever way is best for it. The assumption of household rationality seems altogether plausible, decent, and democratic. It is in keeping with public policy which would support families and not interfere with them.

Perhaps the money would not be used for formal child care; it might rather be used to pay the mother for caring for the child herself. A subsidy would not force the mother to stay home nor would it induce her to go to work. Given the wide range of differences in families, it is perhaps presumptuous to think that such individual decisions can best be realized by public policy. Rather these decisions might be logical candidates to leave to the individual family and the market.

Market Responsiveness

A children's allowance assumes that child care will be supplied in response to market demand. But there is some reason to question whether even those who can afford child care, formal or informal, can frequently find it. Of course, this may be because they are not willing to pay enough. But then a children's allowance might have to pay exorbitant amounts to exact child care from the market place as well. There may be organizational efficiencies in a system of comprehensive child care.

Quality

The quality of child care obtained on the market might be different from public child care, in some ways private child care might be better and in some ways worse. Perhaps a children's allowance would appropriately be supplemented by licensing, certification, and accreditation. (This would inevitably limit the market choice which was one advantage of a children's allowance over comprehensive child care in the first place. And licensing would reduce the supply of caretakers thus raising the price of child care.)

A children's allowance might provide better and/or lower cost care for children than a comprehensive system of day care because of the greater flexibility in allocations of money allowing for a wider range of choice in day care provisions, a choice not only of if day care at all but of how much day care, and of the mix between formal day care and care for the child through informal networks such as neighbors, relatives, baby-sitters and parents. Further the decision as to which sort of day care would be made by those closest to the child.

Parental Preference II

Presumably, families include the child's welfare in some overall family utility function. Families are frequently willing to give their own children love, affection, and care which it is perhaps unrealistic to expect strangers to give. Routinely we expect families to give love, affection and care without pay. Frequently these expectations are fulfilled if not surpassed. A family may well enjoy caring for its own children. We remove the enjoyment and pay for the privilege by providing comprehensive child care.

Frequently, families will care for their children at considerable financial sacrifice. A market day care system makes for cheaper public policy by financing the cost of day care in part by the considerable nonpecuniary benefits accruing to parents who take care of their own children. The recent moves toward family as opposed to institutional care of developmentally disabled children are instructive. These arise only partially from considerations of what is beneficial to the developmentally disabled child, having more to do with the lower cost of family versus institutional care as families are frequently more willing to care for developmentally disabled children than strangers, unless those strangers are paid a lot of money.

Consumer Democracy

A market day care system may be more accountable to what have come to be called "consumers". To the extent that being a consumer involves much of our power, exertion of authority, and interest, a market day care system might be expected to generate genuine consumer involvement along with the market involvement of whether or not to accept and which to accept.

* * *

A system of market day care accounts for the different preferences of different families. Since many families frequently find it enjoyable to take care of their own children it is cheaper. It is more flexible in that various combinations of arrangements can be made. But there may be abuses in market day care, not only on the part of families who may use the extra money for vice, drink, and debauchery, but on the part of providers for whom we might wish to establish licensing procedures. But the abuses, inaccuracies, and clumsiness of a comprehensive child care system may well outweigh the abuses of a market day care system.

And we can tamper where appropriate. Thus, we might provide vouchers which could only be used for child care but which could be used for various sorts of child care. These vouchers like food stamps, medicare, medicaid, would preserve a significant amount of market freedom and would insure against abuse of the system by the family. But if the family is the least worry as far as systemic abuse then a system of vouchers does not solve much. Vouchers would lie in between cash and services on the spectrum.

Comprehensive child care and income redistribution have profound similarities. Frequently examples used to demonstrate the importance of child care more appropriately demonstrate the importance of income re-distribution. Indeed, sometimes advocates of child care explicitly have redistributive anti-poverty effects in mind. It is another question whether reducing poverty is best done by discrete changes like medicaid, food stamps, child care, national health insurance, etc. or by systematic changes in the tax structure.

But perhaps the current arrangement bears examination. It is usually easier to leave things as they are, the current situation is not downright intolerable, however irrational it may sometimes appear. Why tax some, the rich or the childless, in order to benefit others, the poor or the childless? Why should the government subsidize the joy of parents in having children? Having a child, the argument might go, is its own reward and the appropriate place to locate the expense for having children is precisely with the parents and not the childless (who may feel burdened by children anyway). Unlike life, having a child is not a bowl of cherries. Those prepared to enjoy the benefits should be willing to acknowledge and bear the costs.

Today acting or reacting, we are venturing backward or forward to sometimes tried and sometimes untried market solutions. Here the new liberal and neo-conservative meet. Income transfers to buy services on the market keep the market spirit. Public regulations, bureaucracies, and politics by interest groups may well have exceeded the parameters of the politically decent. But can the market redeem public policy?

Consider three other issues: first, the group to whom benefits should be targeted; second politics, which the spectrum can acknowledge only as constraint; third freedom, about which the economic spectrum makes assumptions by omission.

Target Group

The assumption that the household is the proper target of such policies coincides with our political heritage, the sanctity of the family, the perception that to interfere in family economic decision making is a dangerous thing for a government to do, and the realization that the government only interferes with poor families. As a matter of common practice, economics regards households as units which maximize their utility in a market system. Most of the economic literature on income maintenance, welfare reform, and child care simply assumes that the household (or family) is the target of benefits.

But the household does not have to be held the beneficiary of child care policy. For a while we seemed to think it was the child who benefited from child care policy and to whom such a policy should be directed. Holding the child as benefactor led to a rhetoric which painted much of the debate about child care with a hue of unreality. The child perhaps can be considered a target of child programs; however, to do so is to ignore the child's place in the family, the value of intact families, and the difficulty of designing policies about children who are neither of the age of reason nor of political power.

It has been an advance to reckon that the only object of child care policy was not children, indeed, that children perhaps were touched only incidentally. The move to the household as target shed much light on what is, why it is, and what ought to be. And yet to assume the household, not the child, as the target group for child care policy is perhaps misleading as well. Indeed, the only assumptions about family decision making which would justify considering the family as a utility maximizing unit where child care is suitably directed would be either that there is no intrafamily conflict of interest or that the family behaves like a mini-democracy.

But the family is likely not to be united over many issues. For instance, when the child should go to bed may be a question with different answers depending on whether you happen to be the child, mother, father, etc. Whether the family buys a washing machine or a new car may be a source of dispute between husband and wife. The family is not a unit in which everybody's interests are magically molded into one by a marriage contract, anymore than social interests are fused by a social contact.

Nor is a family a unit where everyone has equal rights, equal opportunity, and equal vote. Indeed, it is questionable whether the family is best conceived of as an aggregation of individuals who have formed a social contract in the small, each member deriving rights and advantages from the contract. The family is closer to an interlocking system of authorities and responsibilities, which does not presuppose unanimity of intent and agreement on everything. The "product" of the family may be a dependent baby grown up into a free adult capable of functioning in a democracy. But there is little reason to believe that growing up in a democratic unit is the best way to prepare for a democracy. Families are not democracies nor should they be.

In the fifties we were sometimes barraged with "momism", which saw the family as primarily guided by the mother. In the sixties we were confronted with "sexism", which had guidance, and sometimes dictate, on the significant issues at least, coming from the father. In the seventies there has been talk of external societal forces. And there is another suspicion, that the one who really pulls the strings in the family is the child. Where familial guidance comes from is no easy question. In some ways, the family probably replicates the constructions of power which exist in society. Such constructions may eventuate in momism, patriarchy, or a family exposed to society.

The economy is frequently thought of as composed of firms and households rationally seeking respectively profit and utility maximization. But with the analysis of the firm, it sometimes proves necessary to abandon neo-classical economic ideas about rational profit maximization. Here, programming and theories of decision making have emerged. With all respect for the integrity of the family, it may be prudent that public policy investigate the mechanisms of decision making, programming, and the allocation of resources within the family. If these should turn out to be anything but shared or democratic, then a policy directed toward the household may be wrong.

For example, suppose that there were something like sexism at work so that decision making and the allocation of resources in the family in some way reflected the structure of a male dominated society. Suppose further that public policy toward child care was not interested in perpetuating such a pattern but, rather, in the tradition of rights and equality of opportunity, tried to achieve resources for all regardless of sex or age. Then we might have cause to weigh day care policy options differently. If, for instance, we thought that increments to family income would in some way reflect prior sexist patterns of distribution (one possible conclusion from the New Jersey Negative Income Tax

Experiment) then providing such increments to the household, although increasing the utility of the father, might not commensurately increase the utility of the mother and child, never mind bring it anywhere near the level enjoyed by the father. Of the two options of a children's allowance and comprehensive child care system, the former could be used according to the will of the father while the latter could only be used only one way. This lack of choice, a disadvantage in earlier reflections, may on the contrary turn out to be an advantage if that one way is more in accord with some equality for women and children. A democratic policy directed toward a non-democratic family might attempt some stipulation on how resources were to be used.

And there is more. In the final analysis, it is the mother who, as things are now, has the closest attachment to the child, spends more of her life with the child, and accepts the bulk of the responsibility for child rearing. These are arguments for guarantees that additional income be directed at the mother. And what more natural way to assure this than behind the disguise of universal child care?

It seems doubtful that the government paying money to the mother to stay home would have any effect on the disposition of family resources with out a major shift in our conception of what women do and of its value. Perhaps what mothers do in the household and with children is of value and should be compensated as such. But even were one to think one or both of these true, government recognition and compensation would have no effect on family power constructions and disposition of added income without tight strings added to this government paid "salary".

The best policy for mothers (and for children) may well lie in the provision of direct services. Or a voucher system might be attractive. It would provide more market freedom and might involve the father more directly in decisions affecting the welfare of the child. Perhaps a clear loser in policy options directed toward the household, a voucher system emerges far more respectably in the spectrum of policy options directed toward the mother.

Perhaps it is time to stop thinking of child care as directed toward the household just as it was wise to stop thinking of it as directed toward the child. Perhaps the logical recipient of child care benefits is the mother. And perhaps providing the benefits in kind (or by voucher) far from intruding on the family, is the least intrusive way to assure this.

Freedom

Surely one of the qualities which we should want to preserve and augment is freedom. Then which day care option makes for the most freedom?

It can be argued that the freedom of the market place is the freedom to decide between Post Toasties and Kellogg's Corn Flakes or at the most to decide between different brands of cars. While such arguments are cute, they are specious. Not all goods are so substitutable. The choice between houses, jobs, spouses, and how many children are surely significant. The choice between two brands of cereal may be an inevitable companion to the option of exercising significant market choice freely. Market freedom may not be all that there is to freedom but to suppose it trivial is flip.

But to suppose that market freedom exhausts what we mean by freedom is also flip. There are the freedoms in the Bill of Rights. There is the freedom to be a citizen, something different from a consumer. There is the freedom which comes only when not dominated. And more. And all of this does not begin to address the sorts of freedoms addressed by Freud, Hegel, etc. It is far from clear that market day care would increase any sort of freedom save the highly important (and perhaps even cornerstone) freedom of the market. Economic analysis tells little about a question which is big.

Politics

Economics can only regard politics as a constraint to economic optimality. However, as in the case of benefit-cost analysis, welfare economics argument is predicated on political assumption (in this case the positing of the Kaldor-Hicks criterion as a sort of social welfare function). And, as just seen, day care policy makes assumptions about what can be construed as the "politics" of the family. Further, a case can be made that neo-classical economics is full of political assumptions.

Here, however, I wish merely to note a few aspects of the political environment into which day care policy would be launched. Political scientists and economists share the observation that the most probable description of the near future is that it will look like the present (or be only incrementally or marginally different). A look at the present nature of day care then may be a pretty good indicator of what

we can expect. For one reason or another, day care today is largely informal, with formal day care provided for certain groups and cash subsidies provided for certain others (i.e. reckon tax loopholes as day care subsidies for the well-to-do). There seems little reason to expect large change.

A look at recent history may be cause for yet more pessimism. S.1512, the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, did in fact pass the Congress of the United States. However, it was vetoed by the President and even had it not been, as we know too well from other legislation, authorization does not insure appropriation. The chances of its passage today seems more remote. This remoteness comes not from a vulgar application of pluralist interest group political science, for, many interest groups stand to gain from day care. There are the consumers: women, parents, poor people, etc. And there are the providers: the multitude of professional groups who would have a stake in providing day care, such as teachers, social workers, psychologists, etc. The interests of such groups with perhaps dubious effective power seem secondary here to the fact that child care is expensive and our societal shopping lists are long.

Unfortunately it will not suffice to point out that day care, if offered by a system of transfer payments such as a children's allowance or negative income tax, is not a real expense to society as it does not provide goods and services but rather simply redistributes money. For it is a mistake to view Proposition 13 and its progeny as directed toward real social expense. Rather, or at least so it seems to me, such manifestations of tax payer revolts are directed squarely at keeping hard earned money in an uncertain time and hence are directed in the first instance against redistribution. (It is instructive in this regard to realize that increases in the defense budget are fairly generally approved, presumably because people are willing to make real social sacrifices for what they regard as real social need).

But perhaps there is no reason to regard the tax payers revolt as permanent. And perhaps a scenario where more middle class women enter the labor force, indeed are forced to do so for economic reasons, will lead to the formation of a day care industry as surely as it has already created the fast food industry. With such a scenario day care would almost surely be provided as a service, a neatly packaged Big Mac, whatever theoretical arguments can be mustered in favor of options which attempt to "have it your way".