

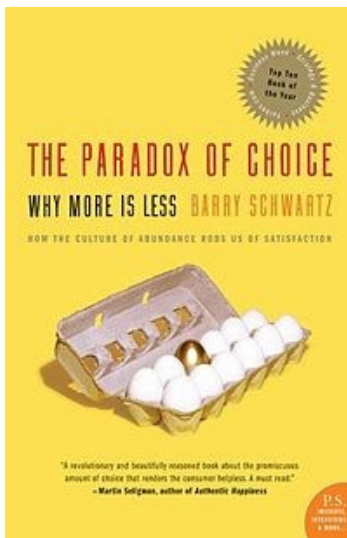
The Paradox of Choice - Why More is Less

How The Culture of Abundance Robs Us of Satisfaction

Barry Schwartz

EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

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Overview

In his book, Barry Schwartz brings forth the idea that having too many choices can be a bad thing, and that the plethora of options available to the average person from such items as the salad dressings on the average supermarket shelf, to the stereo systems we can purchase at our local consumer electronics

store, can actually be detrimental to our psychological and emotional well-being in many circumstances. Schwartz utilizes current, relevant examples and research that are easily relatable and understandable for the average man or woman. He goes on to further explain how and why we choose and offers practical suggestions to increase happiness and to reduce anxiety. He does not say that choice is a bad thing; in fact, as the number of available choices increases, the autonomy, control and liberation it brings to people are powerful and positive. It is when the number of choices we have grows further that the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. From this point on, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates.

Barry Schwartz, an American psychologist, is the Dorwin Cartwright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. He is the author of six books including *The Battle for Human Nature: Science, Morality and Modern Life* and *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life*.

5 Important Lessons Related to Choice

1. Embrace voluntary constraints on your freedom of choice, instead of rebelling against them.
2. Seek what is “good enough” instead of seeking the best.
3. Lower your expectations about the results of decisions.
4. You would be better off if the decisions you made were nonreversible.
5. Pay less attention to what others around you are doing.

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Part 1: When We Choose



“THERE IS NO DENYING THAT CHOICE IMPROVES THE QUALITY OF OUR LIVES. IT ENABLES US TO CONTROL OUR DESTINIES AND TO COME CLOSE TO GETTING EXACTLY WHAT WE WANT OUT OF ANY SITUATION” (P. 3).

Americans have more available options than they have ever had when it comes to consumerism in all dimensions. Shopping for food at your local supermarket is a perfect example of this. A quick glance up and down the aisles, you'll notice such things as 85 different brands of crackers, 285 varieties of cookies and 95 options just in the snack aisle alone! If a person doesn't

want to leave their house to shop, this isn't a problem as there are catalogues that they can look at, order their goods over the phone or the internet and they will be shipped directly to them. When it comes time to choose courses to study in college, students encounter the same vastness of available options and are encouraged to select classes that best suit them

and the course route of study that they have also designed for themselves. Americans go to shopping centers about once a week, which happens to be more often than they go to houses of worship. Americans now have more shopping centers than high schools. Do we have too many choices, too many decisions, and too little time to do what is really important?

History of Choices

Human existence is defined by the choices people make. Every second of everyday we are choosing, and there are always alternatives. Our society has shifted from foraging and subsistence agriculture to the development of crafts and trade. We now have the ability to obtain what we

need for ourselves and for our families, until recently, at the same general store. In the past few decades that long process of simplifying and bundling economic offerings has been reversed. Increasingly, the trend moves back toward time-consuming foraging behaviour, as each of us

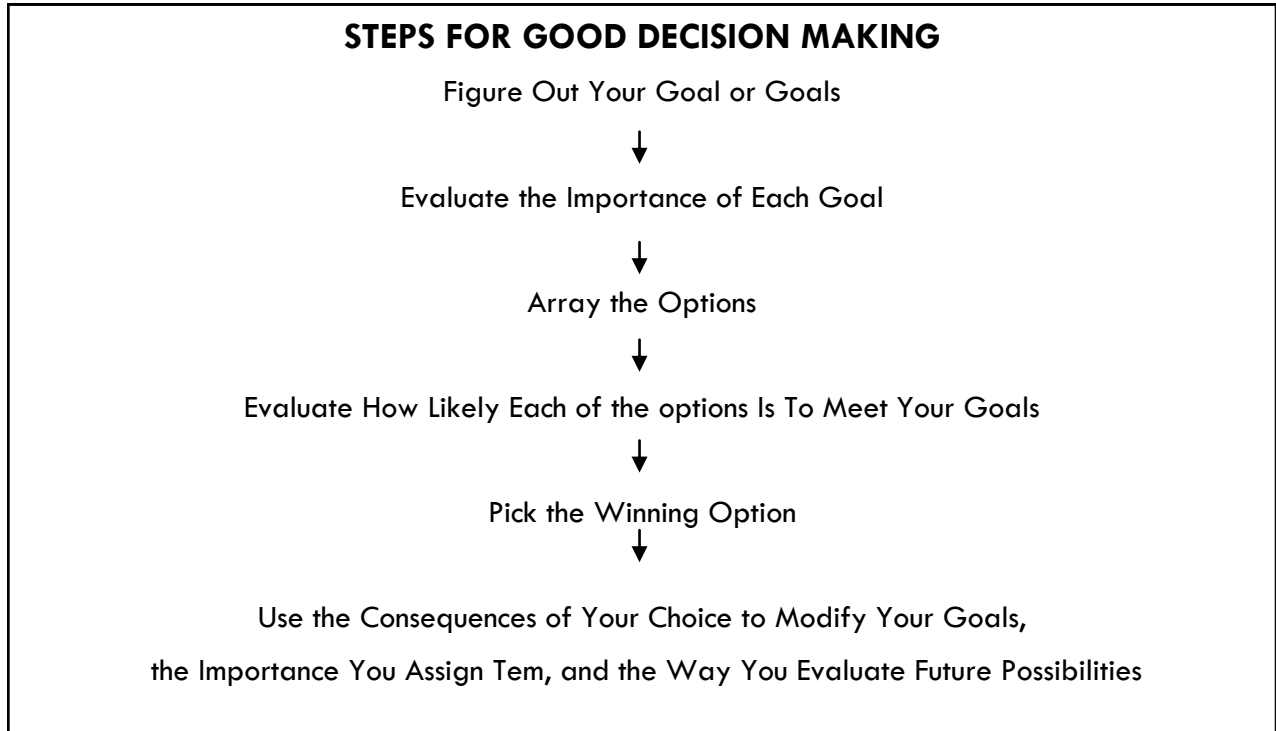
is forced to sift for ourselves through more and more options in every aspect of life. Of course if it came down to whether or not to have choice, we would opt for choice. Schwartz argues that it is the cumulative effect of choice that is causing our society substantial distress.

Choosing
Utilities Beauty Love
Retirement Care Pray
Plans Health
Insurance
Medical

Word
It Out

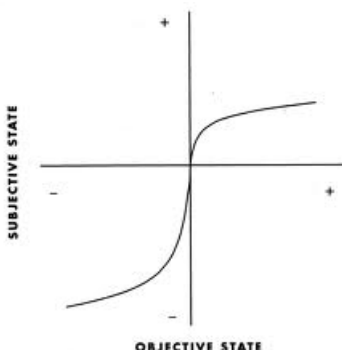
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Part 2: How We Choose



Key Terms & Phrases From Part 2

- ◆ ANCHORING: when an initial piece of information is used to make subsequent decisions (regular vs. sale price)
- ◆ FRAME & ACCOUNT: how our decisions are shaped based on language (5 % fat vs. 95 % fat free)
- ◆ PROSPECT THEORY: how we go about evaluating options and making decisions
- ◆ LOSS AVERSION: losses have more than twice the psychological impacts of equivalent gains
- ◆ ENDOWMENT EFFECT: the feeling of ownership you have once you've been given something
- ◆ LAW OF DIMINISHING MARGINAL UTILITY: As the rich get richer each additional unit of wealth satisfies them less



Horizontal Axis:

Objective States of Affairs (+ to the right of the vertical axis)
(- to the left of the vertical axis)

Examples: Gains or losses of money, status on the job, golf handicap, etc...

Vertical Axis:

Subjective or Psychological responses to the changes in states of the affairs

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Chooser: Someone who thinks actively about the possibilities before making a decision, reflects on what is important to them in their life, and what's important about this particular decision, and what the short- and long-range consequences of that decision may be. They are thoughtful enough to conclude that maybe none of the available alternatives are satis-

→
THE WEALTH OF OPTIONS
←

Picker: Someone who does none of the things that a chooser does; a picker grabs this and that and hopes for the best. Being a picker is not significant when you're making menial choices such as what colour socks to wear, but decisions don't always appear before us with their severity of consequences measured beforehand.

"Unfortunately the proliferation of choice in our lives robs us of the opportunity to decide for ourselves just how important any given decision is" (p. 75).

When Only The Best Will Do...

ABSOLUTE BEST vs. GOOD ENOUGH

Maximizer: You seek and only accept the best. You exhaust all other alternatives to make sure that you know that what you're buying is the absolute best (quality, price, etc...). You aspire to achieve a given goal and are less likely to get satisfaction out of the choices you make compared to the satisfier.

Satisfier: You settle with something that is good enough and you don't worry about the possibility that there might be something better out there.



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Characteristics of a Maximizer



1. Maximizers engage in more product comparisons than satisficers, both before and after they make purchasing decisions.
2. Maximizers take longer than satisficers to decide on a purchase.
3. Maximizers spend more time than satisficers comparing their purchasing decisions to the decisions of others.
4. Maximizers are more likely to experience regret after a purchase.
5. Maximizers are more likely to spend time thinking about hypothetical alternatives to the purchases they've made.
6. Maximizers generally feel less positive about their purchasing decisions.
7. Maximizers savour positive events less than satisficers and do not cope as well with negative events.
8. After something bad happens to them, maximizers' sense of well-being takes longer to recover.
9. Maximizers tend to brood or ruminate more than satisficers.

MAXIMIZING & REGRET



Almost everyone who scores high on the Maximization Scale (a scale developed to determine people's propensity to maximize or satisfice based on thirteen items) also scores high on regret.

Schwartz discovered that people with high maximization scores experienced less satisfaction with life, were less happy, were less optimistic, and were more depressed than people with low maximization scores.

FURTHER CLARIFICATION

- ◆ *Maximizer and Perfectionist are not synonymous*
- ◆ *Perfectionists have high standards that they don't expect to meet*
- ◆ *Maximizers have high standards that they do expect to meet*
- ◆ *Nobody is a maximizer in every decision, and probably everybody is in some.*
- ◆ *Overload of choice for a maximizer is a nightmare, but not for a satisficer*
- ◆ *Maximizers may not even realize they're doing it, but believe to be the best is to have the best.*

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Part 3: Why We Suffer

In this section of the book Schwartz reiterates the importance of freedom and autonomy to our well-being. He also observes that modern Americans don't seem to be benefiting from the amount of choice that is available to them (even though they have more than any group of people have ever had). In order to understand why we are suffering, we must understand what makes us happy. Some people might guess that money

makes us happy, but if we believe that, how can we explain gains in wealth, but decreases in happiness? Schwartz pulls conclusions from researchers who have found that it is our close social relationships that make us happy. People who are married, who have good friends, and who are close with their families are happier than those who are not. We are paying for increased affluence and increased freedom with a substan-

tial decrease in the quality and quantity of social relations. Being socially connected takes time. People want the closeness, not just the acquaintanceship. These relationships take time to develop and once established, take a significant amount of time to maintain. A major contributor to this time burden is the vastly greater number of choices we find ourselves preparing for, making, re-evaluating and perhaps regretting.



QUESTION

How do we determine who gets our time, energy and love?

“Choice is what enables us to tell the world who we are and what we care about” (p. 100).

Happy People

Are married
Have good friends
Are close to their families



Practical Applications

The value of autonomy is built into the fabric of our legal and moral system. Autonomy is what allows us legally and morally to be responsible for our actions. It's the reason we praise individuals for their achievements and also blame them for their failures.

This particular point of emphasis from Schwartz is applicable to the view teachers hold of their students. When a student completes their homework, submits high quality assignments and does well on exams, we attribute this to choice; they determined what was

required of them was purposeful, they engaged in the process and ultimately, accomplished what we wanted them to. This is also true for when a student does poorly academically. We believe that we did everything we could to help them and that they

choose not to take advantage of the situation. If they had only made better choices they would have done better in our classes.

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Part 3: Why We Suffer

Choice is a burden as a result of a complex interaction among many psychological processes that permeate our culture. They include:

1. Rising Expectations: Our society is built around being, having and experiencing the very best. We strive to be the best in our jobs, drive the best cars and own the best houses. Accepting anything less is considered to be unacceptable.

2. Opportunity Costs: The degree to which one passes up the opportunities that a different option would have afforded.

- ◆ This happens because the quality of any given option can not be assessed in isolation from its alternatives.

Example: An opportunity cost of taking a job near your romantic partner is that you won't be near your family.

* Every choice one makes has opportunity costs associated with it.

3. Aversion to Trade-Offs: Being forced to confront trade-offs in making decisions makes people unhappy and indecisive. The emotional costs of trade-offs diminishes our sense of satisfaction with a decision and interferes with the quality of decisions we make.

4. Adaptation: Simply put, humans get used to things and then they start to take them for granted.

Example: When air-conditioning is first installed in a home, the homeowner loves the new comfort, but has to go into the outdoor heat to remember the air-conditioning they no longer have.

5. Regret: There are two types of regret:

anticipated and postdecision. Both types will raise the emotional stakes of decisions. Anticipated regret will make decisions harder to make, and postdecision regret will make them harder to enjoy.

6. Self-Blame: If someone is responsible for an action that turns out badly, they will experience more regret than if things had turned out badly because of something or someone else. Example: If you choose the restaurant and have a bad meal, you will feel worse about your decision than if you had eaten at a restaurant recommended by a friend.

7. Social Comparisons: The degree in which we evaluate our own current state of affairs is influenced by how we see ourselves when compared to those around us.

8. Maximizing: Maximizers are less happy, less satisfied with their lives, and are more depressed than satisficers because the taint of trade-offs and opportunity costs washes out much that should be satisfying about the decisions they make.



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Part 4: What We Can Do

Schwartz offers 11 practical strategies to mitigate and even eliminate many of the sources of distress that arise because of an overabundance of choice. He believes having too many choices produces psychological distress, especially when combined with regret, concern about status, adaptation, social comparison and maximization. The 11 strategies are:

Choose When To Choose

Be a Chooser, Not a Picker

Satisfice More and Maximize Less

Think About the Opportunity Costs of Opportunity Costs

Make Your Decisions Nonreversible

Practice and “Attitude of Gratitude”

Regret Less

Anticipate Adaptation

Control Expectations

Curtail Social Comparison

Learn to Love Constraints

SUMMARY CRITIQUE

Barry Schwartz presents a counter-intuitive philosophy that emphasizes the greater the number of options and choices we have, the less satisfaction we will derive from our decisions. The arguments he provides for the numerous examples to support his statements are evidenced-based and correlate to the research findings. He draws conclusions from other researchers and provides the reader with real-life examples. However, the examples provided are geared toward those who come from middle or upper-class backgrounds. Not all readers would be able to relate to how they felt when they were choosing which college to enroll in or which luxury S.U.V.'s they compared before making a vehicular purchase.

The most significant argument he provided for describing why certain individuals feel overwhelmed with the plethora of available choices and why some flourish was the difference between maximizers and satisficers. It is easy for the reader to identify which category they fit into as Schwartz provides short surveys and result interpretations within the book the reader can complete. I was able to best relate to the maximizer profile, and with the help of the final segment in the book "What We Can Do", was able to reflect and decide how I will proceed with decision making in the future in all capacities to enjoy more of life and allocate the precious time I have to the things that really matter, my friends and my family.