

Paradox of Choice by Barry Schwartz
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In the book "The Paradox of choice" the author Barry Schwartz discusses the effect that all the choices in our highly individualistic consumer culture has on our happiness and general satisfaction. He begins the book by admitting that "when people have no choice, life is almost un-bearable," explaining that without a sense of freedom and autonomy people find it fairly impossible to be happy. He argues however that choices like where we work, what religious beliefs we hold, and how we spend our time are different then choices in goods and services, especially in our over-saturated capitalist culture. Schwartz says that while things like what we do with our time or what beliefs we choose to hold contribute to a feeling of freedom which is integral in our happiness, things like having tons of different meals to choose from at a restaurant or having twenty different types of toothpaste to choose from is actually almost a tyrannical force on our lives.

Two different examples used by Schwartz to demonstrate this point stood out to me, the first being about his jeans. Schwartz recollects the last time that he had to go shopping for a pair of new jeans at the Gap, he goes in and tells the woman working there that he wants a pair of jeans. Upon telling her this he is immediately bombarded with choices; does he want straight fit or relaxed fit? Button fly or zipper fly? Faded or regular? Stonewashed or acid washed? All he really wanted was a pair of regular jeans but when introduced to all the choices he had in type of jeans he was convinced that one type or another was going to be the best possible option for him to choose. He therefore wasted almost an entire day trying them on and trying to find the best option, when originally he would have spent five minutes on buying a regular basic pair of jeans. This paralyzing effect is one of the factors that Schwartz identifies as making our lives more stressful and less happy. Even if one is not particularly stressed by the act of choosing one still spends time and energy that is generally not worth the small benefit that one option holds over another. The last negative effect of the jeans situation is that even after buying the jeans, he wonders as he puts them on at home if he wouldn't have been happier if he had chosen the relaxed fit instead, or if he might not have looked better in faded jeans. This second-guessing will always lead to remorse as one begins to imagine how things possible could have gone better if you had chosen another option. This, without fail, steals any satisfaction that one would have had with their purchase. The second example he uses depicts a study where 2 kiosks were set up to sell the same high end jam. One kiosk had only six flavors available to sample whereas the other kiosk had twenty-four different flavors available to sample. The results were very telling as only three percent of those who sampled jams from the kiosk with twenty-four samples ended up purchasing jam where as thirty percent of those who sampled jams from the kiosk with only six options purchased the jam. The reason behind this phenomenon, as explained by Schwartz, is that the people who were presented with twenty-four samples were completely overwhelmed by choices and were plagued by so much second-guessing that they succumbed to the fear that they would make the wrong decision and decided instead not to buy.

I think that these two examples are some of the most powerful parts of the book as they are so easily relatable and demonstrate the point he is trying to make on a very basic level that

anyone can identify with. I, for example, after reading the jeans example, was immediately reminded of when I played the newest Call of Duty video game for the first time. I was playing with one of my friends and we immediately jumped into an online area full of people shooting each other. When the game loaded we were presented with a screen arraying a variety of different guns to play with. My friend clicked on the first gun in the line without really looking at it and jumped right into the game. I, however, decided to scroll through the list of guns, extensively checking out their positive and negative features, the clip size, the damage, the range, trying to find the gun that would be the most effective for me to use. When I finally chose one and spawned into the game my friend had been playing for a couple minutes and already had several kills. Even though my gun choice was better than his I still ended up getting less kills and scoring lower in the game because the benefits I reaped by choosing a slightly better gun were outweighed by the consequences of spending time deliberating. I also had a sneaking suspicion through out the match that had I chosen a different gun I may have been able to catch up with him and this made me even more unhappy.

Barry Schwartz would define us in this situation as a maximizer and a satisficer. A maximizer, when offered a choice, will compare every option trying to decide which option had the most amounts of benefits with the least amount of drawbacks, in this example; me trying to find the most effective gun to play the game with. A satisficer sets out with a set of criteria and will choose the most convenient option as long as it fits their set of criteria, in this example; my friend picking the first gun that appeared on the list. Schwartz says that satisficers are generally always going to be happier than maximizers as they experience neither the paralysis and anxiety of indecision that delays and stresses the maximizer, nor the twinge of uncertainty that you wouldn't have been better off choosing a different option.

One complaint I had about this book is while Schwartz argued his point very persuasively and explained his theory in a way that was entertaining and easy to understand, he offers little to no advice on what to do to address this problem. I am a maximizer in many aspects of my life and I can see that now but what do I do about it? Besides the suggestion of creating routines, (which is arguable the mind's natural defense against being overwhelmed by choice but is not applicable to many situations) there is a dearth of advice on how to fight one's maximization urges.