

I don't just read books, I devour them, with a pen in my hand, highlighting and making notes. After reading, I copy down all the notes and type them up, considering each idea all over again. Yet, I have often found that key learnings are too quickly gone from memory. That's why I started compiling these two-page book reviews for personal use. With the encouragement of friends and colleagues, I offer my notes now through the Creative Option C website so that others may gain the insight of these authors and perhaps be inspired to read the entire work.

TITLE:	<u>The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less</u>
AUTHOR:	Barry Schwartz, PhD, Social Theory Professor, Swarthmore.
PUBLICATION:	Harper Perennial, 2004

PRIMARY THEME: With an abundance of options in everything from life insurance to blue jeans, people are not necessarily happier. Having personal freedom is good. Having too many decisions to make, and too many options for each choice, however, is not only disorienting, it can also cause stress and dissatisfaction.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION: Americans have a profound amount of personal freedom to choose the way we live the various aspects of our lives. Indeed, when we step back and look through the eyes of this author, we see that we are being bombarded with choices every day. Some of us are quite good at making decisions without hardship and are satisfied with our decisions afterward. For those who struggle, the author offers insight into the causes of this strain, along with strategies for reducing the amount of effort we put in to every day decisions and for increasing our amount of happiness afterward.

CHAPTERS:

Prologue – The Paradox of Choice: A Road Map

Part One: Why We Choose

- *Chapter 1: Let's Go Shopping.* The array of options facing an American consumer on a daily basis is dizzying. Need a gallon of milk? Make a series of decisions: whole or skim? Organic or non-organic? Brand... container shape... the choices are many. Even more overwhelming choices await in other grocery store aisles.
- *Chapter 2: New Choice.* As complicated as grocery shopping might be, Americans can now choose their electric company, hospital, health insurance, retirement plan, where to work, where to live, how to pray. While few of us would ever willingly relinquish the personal freedom that is represented by the individual choices we are allowed, taken together they are quite a huge package and are increasingly difficult to manage.

Part Two: How We Choose

- *Chapter 3: Deciding and Choosing.* Here the author begins to outline a framework for navigating the world of choices with less strain. Step one is to clearly identify our goals. Next is to gather information according to the things that are important to us, as opposed to what is important to others.
- *Chapter 4: When Only The Best Will Do.* Two unique terms are employed here, and the respective personality types are described. "Maximizers" seek to make the most of every choice, and often cause themselves undue stress, while "satisficers" content themselves with good enough.

Part Three: Why We Suffer

- *Chapter 5: Choice and Happiness.* Social scientists link happiness with close social relations, which, paradoxically, often involve commitments, loyalty, and other restrictions on individual freedom. Every moment we spend trying to make a decision is time not invested in our relationships.

- *Chapter 6: Missed Opportunities.* The options we choose often suffer from comparison to the options we did not choose. The more options we have, the more we can be beset by self-doubt, second-guessing, and the need to justify our decisions. The more opportunities are available, and not chosen, the more we may feel the cost of roads not taken.
- *Chapter 7: "If Only...": The Problem of Regret.* We don't just get post-decision regret. We can also suffer from *anticipatory* regret. Which, of course, can lead to paralysis. More subtly, risk-aversion can influence our choices to be more conservative. Our human ability to imagine perfect scenarios to compare our realities to often induces more regret than a focus on real options alone would do.
- *Chapter 8: Why Decisions Disappoint: The Problem of Adaptation.* It turns out that human beings can be quite bad at predicting how a certain event will make us feel, which can lead to bad decisions. Bad decisions can cause regret, even when the situation ends well. Further, like addicts who require more and more of a substance to remain high, we often need higher and higher levels of benefits from a decision in order to be pleased with it. To combat the troubles of such adaptation, focus on gratitude.
- *Chapter 9: Why Everything Suffers From Comparison.* Experiences, and how we feel about them, are relative. We compare the experience to what we hoped for, what we expected, what we have experienced before, and to what others have experienced. As our material and social circumstances improve, and the number of available options increases, our expectations go up. This phenomenon is heightened in those whose standards are external... who compare themselves to others as opposed to internal values of what is good or sufficient.
- *Chapter 10: Whose Fault Is It? Choice, Disappointment, and Depression.* Here, the author makes his strongest case that "unlimited choice...can produce genuine suffering." Increased prevalence of clinical depression is a sign of societal unhappiness, which Schwartz believes has been brought on by the proliferation of possibilities and the raised expectations of modern life. It is exacerbated by a kind of individualism that produces an intense regret over failures.

Part Four: What We Can Do

- *Chapter 11: What To Do About Choice.* Eleven ideas for mitigating choice-related sources of distress:
 - Choose what to choose.
 - Be a chooser, not a picker.
 - Satisfice more and maximize less.
 - Think about the opportunity costs of opportunity costs.
 - Make your decisions non-reversible.
 - Practice an attitude of gratitude.
 - Regret less.
 - Anticipate adaptation.
 - Control expectations.
 - Curtail social comparison.
 - Learn to love constraints.

TOOLS: Extensive end notes provide the reader with resources for further reading, while a Q&A with the author gives additional food for thought. A panoply of mini-quizzes throughout the book give readers a chance to identify their own decision-making tendencies... a maximization scale, a regret scale, a satisfaction with life scale, etc.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: *"What the studies show is that being a maximizer is correlated with being unhappy.... I believe that being a maximizer does play a causal role in people's unhappiness, and I believe that learning how to satisfice is an important step not only in coping with a world of choice but in simply enjoying life."* p. 86.

"Bronze medalists are happier than silver medalists." p. 150.

"We probably can do more to affect the quality of our lives by controlling our expectations than we can by doing virtually anything else." p. 187