

THE BIG IDEAS

Some Key Ideas

The book is packed with them.

Being Seduced

By branding. We all are.

Maximizers vs. Satisficers

Huge idea.

Perfectionism

Tends to go with maximizing.

Domain Specificity

Maximizing is domain specific.

Mitigating the Paradox

Is hard work.

“An Attitude of Gratitude”

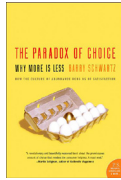
Practice it!

Social Comparison

Curtail it!

“I believe we make the most of our freedoms by learning to make good choices about the things that matter, while at the same time unburdening ourselves from too much concern about the things that don't.”

~ Barry Schwartz



The Paradox of Choice

Why More Is Less - How the Culture of Abundance Robs Us of Satisfaction

BY BARRY SCHWARTZ · HARPERCOLLINS © 2005 · 304 PAGES

“The fact that *some* choice is good doesn't necessarily mean that *more* choice is better. As I will demonstrate, there is a cost to having an overload of choice. As a culture, we are enamored of freedom, self-determination, and variety, and we are reluctant to give up any of our options. But clinging tenaciously to all the choices available to us contributes to bad decisions, to anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction—even to clinical depression.”

~ Barry Schwartz from *The Paradox of Choice*

Barry Schwartz is a Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College and this book is packed with Big Ideas on how, as the sub-title suggests, “*the culture of abundance robs us of satisfaction.*”

In short, we now have so many options that we're suffering.

In this Note we're going to take a quick peek at some of the theory behind “The Paradox of Choice” along with some Big Ideas to create more happiness and meaning.

Hope you dig it.

For now, let's jump in with a quick look at some of the key themes from the book:

SOME KEY IDEAS

“Throughout the book, you will learn about a wide range of research findings from psychologists, economists, market researchers, and decision scientists, all related to choice and decision making. There are important lessons to be learned from this research, some of them not so obvious, and others even counterintuitive. For example, I will argue that:

1. We would be better off if we embraced voluntary constraints on our freedom of choice, instead of rebelling against them.
2. We would be better off seeking what was “good enough” instead of seeking the best (have you ever heard a parent say, “I want only the ‘good enough’ for my kids?”).
3. We would be better off if we lowered our expectations about the results of decisions.
4. We would be better off if the decisions we made were nonreversible.
5. We would be better off if we paid less attention to what others around us were doing.

These conclusions fly in the face of conventional wisdom that the more choices people have, the better off they are, that the best way to get good results is to have very high standards, and that it's always better to have a way to back out of a decision than not. What I hope to show is that the conventional wisdom is wrong, at least when it comes to what satisfies us in the decisions we make.”

The book is essentially organized around detailing the above themes. Let's take a look at a few in more detail!

"Americans go to shopping centers about once a week, more often than they go to houses of worship, and Americans now have more shopping centers than high schools. In a recent survey, 93 percent of teenage girls surveyed said that shopping was their favorite activity."

~ Barry Schwartz

BEING SEDUCED BY BRANDING

"According to James Twitchell, the key insight that has shaped modern advertising came to cigarette manufacturers in the 1930s. In the course of market research, they discovered that smokers who taste-tested various cigarette brands without knowing which was which couldn't tell them apart. So, if the manufacturer wanted to sell more of his particular brand, he was either going to have to make it distinctive or make consumers *think* it was distinctive, which was considerably easier. With that was born the practice of selling a product by associating it with a glamorous lifestyle.

We probably like to think that we're too smart to be seduced by such "branding," but we aren't."

That "birth of branding" story is classic.

And, I just love this line: "*We probably like to think that we're too smart to be seduced by such "branding," but we aren't.*"

Keep that in mind the next time you think you *need* the more/most luxurious item out there. You've been seduced, yo. :)

MAXIMIZERS VS. SATISFICERS

"Choosing wisely begins with developing a clear understanding of your goals. And the first choice you must make is between the goal of choosing the absolute best and the goal of choosing something that is good enough.

If you seek and accept only the best, you are a *maximizer*... Maximizers need to be assured that every purchase or decision was the best that could be made. Yet how can anyone truly know that any given option is absolutely the best possible? ... As a decision strategy, maximizing creates a daunting task, which becomes all the more daunting as the number of options increases.

The alternative to maximizing is to be a *satisficer*. To satisfice is to settle for something that is good enough and not worry about the possibility that there might be something better. A satisficer has criteria and standards. She searches until she finds an item that meets those standards, and at that point, she stops."

Alright.

Maximizers vs. Satisficers.

This is important stuff.

As Schwartz advises, choosing wisely begins by choosing how we're going to approach our goals: are we going to go for the absolute best or are we going to go for what's good enough?

Schwartz continues: "The difference between the two types is that the satisficer is content with the merely excellent as opposed to the absolute best.

I believe that the goal of maximizing is a source of great dissatisfaction, that it can make people miserable—especially in a world that insists on providing an overwhelming number of choices, both trivial and not so trivial."

MAXIMIZING AND PERFECTIONISM

"Thus, perfectionists, like maximizers, seek to achieve the best. But I think there is an important difference between them. While maximizers and perfectionists both have very high standards, I think that the perfectionists have very high standards that they don't expect to meet, whereas the maximizers have very high standards they *do* expect to meet.

Which may explain why we found that those who score high on perfectionism, unlike

"We can imagine a point at which the options would be so copious that even the world's most ardent supporters of freedom of choice would begin to say, "enough already." Unfortunately, that point of revulsion seems to recede endlessly into the future."

~ Barry Schwartz

"The trick is to learn to embrace and appreciate satisficing, to cultivate it in more and more aspects of life, rather than merely being resigned to it."

~ Barry Schwartz

maximizers, are not depressed, regretful, or unhappy. Perfectionists may not be as happy with the results of their actions as they should be, but they seem to be happier with the results of their actions than maximizers are with the results of theirs."

Maximizing and perfectionism.

According to Schwartz, there's an interesting difference: *"the perfectionists have very high standards that they don't expect to meet, whereas the maximizers have very high standards they do expect to meet."*

Reminds me of John Wooden's wisdom from *Wooden* (see Notes) where he tells us: *"Perfection is what you are striving for, but perfection is an impossibility. However, striving for perfection is not an impossibility. Do the best you can under the conditions that exist. That is what counts."*

And, at this stage, it's impossible for me to talk about perfectionism without bringing Tal Ben-Shahar and his great book, *The Pursuit of Perfect*, into the picture. (If you have perfectionist tendencies I HIGHLY recommend the Note and book!! I get something new every time I re-read the Note, including right now. :)

The basic idea is that we want to become "optimalists" rather than perfectionists. The key difference between the two? The optimalist deals with the constraints of reality—they know that NOTHING will *ever* be perfect. Essentially, they are ambitious satisficers rather than manic maximizers.

One of the most powerful concepts he shares is the idea that we need to see our ideals as GUIDING STARS *not* distant shores. We're never going to attain a level of perfection in anything we do. But, we can use our highest ideals as a sort of North star that keeps us moving in the right direction! :)

As he puts it: *"The optimalism ideal is not a distant shore to be reached but a distant star that guides us and can never be reached. As Carl Rogers pointed out, "The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination."*

How are *you* doing with that?

P.S. One of the key bummers of constantly maximizing in pursuit of perfection is a frequent, profound sense of regret.

Here's what Schwartz says about that: *"It should also be clear that the problem of regret will loom larger for maximizers than for satisficers. No matter how good something is, if a maximizer discovers something better, he'll regret having failed to choose it in the first place. Perfection is the only weapon against regret, and endless, exhaustive, paralyzing consideration of the alternatives is the only way to achieve perfection. For a satisficer, the stakes are lower. The possibility of regret doesn't loom as large, and perfection is unnecessary."*

MAXIMIZING: IT'S DOMAIN SPECIFIC

"The truth is that maximizing and satisficing orientations tend to be "domain specific." Nobody is a maximizer in every decision, and probably everybody is in some. Perhaps what distinguishes maximizers from satisficers is the range and number of decisions in which an individual operates as one or the other.

This is good news, because what it means is that most of us have the capacity to be satisficers. The task, then, for someone who feels overwhelmed by choices, is to apply the satisficing strategy more often, letting go of the expectation that "the best" is attainable."

Good news: No one is a maximizer in *every* domain! :)

"By some estimates, depression in the year 2000 was about ten times as likely as depression in the year 1900."

~ Barry Schwartz

How about you?

In what domains are you a satisficer (happy with "good enough") and in what domains are you a maximizer (need to have the "absolute best")?

Let's take a quick inventory and work out our self-awareness muscles as we move from theory to practice.

I tend to be a maximizer in these areas:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I tend to be a satisficer in these areas:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

And, most importantly, how can you become more of a satisficer in the domains where you tend to be a maximizer?!

(For those curious souls, I used to be a maximizer in my intimate relationships—never willing to "settle" as I looked for the "absolute best" possible relationship. (Apologies to all women I dated before Alexandra. :) Deliberately imposing constraints and committing to our relationship was one of the most empowering choices of my life.

I'm working on moving from being a maximizer to a satisficer with where I live (too many options!!) and what I do creatively on a day-to-day basis (too many options!!). I'm pretty content with my Prius and old iPhone and wearing the same clothes every (single!) day. :)

You?

MITIGATING THE PARADOX

"The drawbacks of maximizing are so profound and the benefits so tenuous that we may well ask why anyone would pursue such a strategy."

~ Barry Schwartz

"The news I've reported is not good. Here we are, living at the pinnacle of human possibility, awash in material abundance. As a society, we have achieved what our ancestors could, at most, only dream about, but it has come at a great price. We get what we say we want, only to discover that what we want doesn't satisfy us to the degree we expect. We are surrounded by modern, time-saving devices, but we never seem to have enough time. We are free to be the authors of our own lives, but we don't know exactly what kind of lives we want to "write."

The "success" of modernity turns out to be bittersweet, and everywhere we look it appears that a significant contributing factor is the overabundance of choice. Having too many choices produces psychological distress, especially when combined with regret, concern about status, adaptation, social comparison, and perhaps most important, the desire to have the best of everything—to maximize.

I believe there are steps we can take to mitigate—even eliminate—many of these sources of distress, but they aren't easy. They require practice, discipline, and perhaps a new way of thinking. On the other hand, each of these steps will bring its own rewards."

The final chapter of the book features eleven things we can do about the paradox of choice.

Let's take a more detailed look at a couple of my favorites!

PRACTICE "AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE"

"We can vastly improve our subjective experience by consciously striving to be grateful more often for what is good about a choice or an experience, and to be disappointed less by what is

"What may be the easiest route to increasing satisfaction with the results of decisions is to remove excessively high expectations about them."

~ Barry Schwartz

bad...

It may seem demeaning to accept the idea that experiencing gratitude takes practice. Why not just tell yourself that "starting tomorrow, I'm going to pay more attention to what's good in my life," and be done with it? The answer is that habits of thought die hard. Chances are good that if you gave yourself that general directive, you won't actually follow it. Instead you might consider adopting a simple routine:

1. Keep a notepad at your bedside.
2. Every morning, when you wake up, or every night, when you go to bed, use the notepad to list five things that happened the day before that you're grateful for. These objects of gratitude occasionally will be big (a job promotion, a great first date), but most of the time, they will be small (sunlight streaming in through the bedroom window, a kind word from a friend, a piece of swordfish cooked just the way you like it, an informative article in a magazine).
3. You will probably feel a little silly and even self-conscious when you start doing this. But if you keep it up, you will find that it gets easier and easier, more and more natural. You may also find yourself discovering many things to be grateful for on even the most ordinary of days. Finally, you may find yourself feeling better and better about your life as it is, and less and less driven to find the "new and improved" products and activities that will enhance it."

Gratitude.

We're talking about it a lot in these Notes (especially in PN-II; check out the Notes on *Thanks!* for the definitive book on the science of gratitude!). Why do we keep on coming back to it? Because it's a REALLY (!) powerful way to get our happiness on.

I'm gonna keep hammering on this idea till we all make it a part of our daily practice. :)

So, are you keeping a gratitude journal yet?

As Schwartz advises us, we may *think* we can just tell ourselves that "starting tomorrow I'll start being super grateful!" but that's just not the way it works. We've gotta make it a systematic habit.

The good news is that when we make taking the time to log our gratitude a daily habit, we're strengthening our ability to see all the amazing things that already exist in our lives—which, as we scientifically know, increases our levels of happiness!

How about we do another quick little gratitude workout by taking another little inventory? :)

I feel really grateful for:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

CURTAIN SOCIAL COMPARISON

"We evaluate the quality of our experiences by comparing ourselves to others. Though social comparison can provide useful information, it often reduces our satisfaction. So by comparing ourselves to others less, we will be satisfied more..."

...social comparison seems sufficiently destructive to our sense of well-being that it is worthwhile to remind ourselves to do it less. Because it is easier for a satisficer to avoid social comparison than for a maximizer, learning that "good enough" is good enough may automatically reduce concern with how others are doing.

"The more social comparison you do, the more likely you are to be affected by it, and the direction of such effects tends to be negative."

~ Barry Schwartz

Following the other suggestions I've made may sometimes mean that when judged by an absolute standard, the results of decisions will be less good than they might otherwise have been—all the more reason to fight the tendency to make social comparisons.

So:

1. Remember that "He who dies with the most toys wins" is a bumper sticker, not wisdom.
2. Focus on what makes *you* happy, and what gives meaning to *your* life."

Social comparison.

We need a bit of it to survive and it will always be a part of our lives, but we need to be *really* careful not to drown in it.

In fact, "Avoiding Social Comparison" is one of the twelve scientifically-proven ways to boost our levels of happiness profiled by Sonja Lyubomirsky in her great book *The How of Happiness* (see Notes). She dedicates an entire chapter to the issue, but sums it up succinctly with this gem: "*The happier the person, the less attention she pays to how others around her are doing.*"

So, if you have a habit of incessantly comparing yourself to others, see if you can reign that in a bit! Focus on what gives YOU meaning and what makes YOU happy—independent of what other people might be doing!!

... Well, there ya go. That was a *really* quick look at a densely-packed-with-Ideas book.

If this Note's resonating with you, I think you'd enjoy diving deeper and exploring all of Schwartz's compelling Ideas!

Here's to rockin' it!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

The How of Happiness
The Pursuit of Perfect
Wooden
Learned Optimism
Thanks!
Authentic Happiness

About the Author of "The Paradox of Choice"

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Barry Schwartz is the Dorwin Cartwright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College. He is the author of several 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*. His articles have appeared in many of the leading journals in his field, including the *American Psychologist*. He lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is a lover of wisdom (aka a "Philosopher") and a passionate student of life who's committed to inspiring and empowering millions of people to live their greatest lives as he studies, embodies and shares the universal truths of optimal living. He harts his job.