

SELECT ALL

Can you have too many choices?

BY CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

A radio producer in Washington, D.C., got a promotion a few years ago on the grounds that he was a "good decision-maker." Self-deprecating to a fault, he reminded his bosses that many of the decisions he'd made since joining the station hadn't exactly worked out. They didn't care. "Being a good decision-maker means you're good at making decisions," one executive cheerily told him. "It doesn't mean you make good decisions."

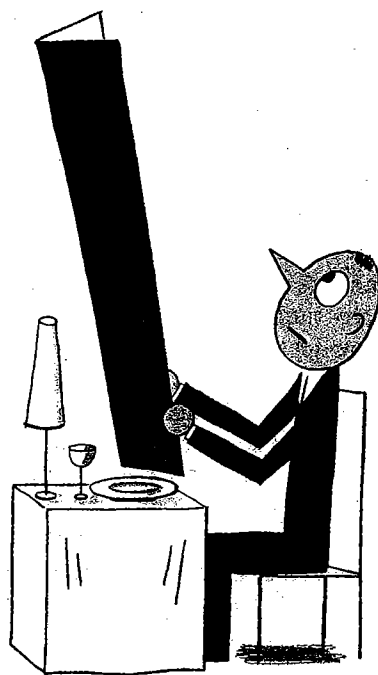
This boss figured that the station had less to fear from periodic screwups than from the day-in, day-out paralysis of someone too cowed by choice to choose at all. He had a point. A few decades of research has made it clear that most people are terrible choosers—they don't know what they want, and the prospect of deciding often causes not just jitters but something like anguish. The evidence is all around us, from restaurant-goers' complaints that "the menu is too long" to Michael Jackson's face.

The phenomenon isn't new. "The ordinary man believes he is free when he is permitted to act arbitrarily, but in this very arbitrariness lies the fact that he is unfree," Hegel wrote. "Negative infinity" was his term for how the man without a well-anchored sense of self would perceive the marketplace. There can even be common ground between those who recoil from choice and those who have no choice at all, or so Louis MacNeice implied in a poem from the nineteen-forties about drunks:

Those Haves who cannot bear making a choice,
Those Have-nots who are bored with having nothing to choose,
Call for their drinks in the same tone of voice,
Find a factitious popular front in booze.

PHILIPPE PETITROULET

Researchers of cognitive dissonance in the nineteen-fifties found that consumers would continue to read ads for a new car after they'd bought it but would avoid information about other brands, fearing post-purchase misgivings. And in the early eighties the social thinker Albert O. Hirschman, in "Shifting Involvements," sought to



A "preference" is a prediction, and often a wrong one.

introduce the concept of "disappointment" into mainstream economic theory. "*The world I am trying to understand,*" he wrote (and the desperate italics are in the original), "*is one in which men think they want one thing and then upon getting it, find out to their dismay that they don't want it nearly as much as they thought or don't want it at all and that something else, of which they were hardly aware, is what they really want.*"

Mischoosing of this kind is what

Barry Schwartz, a social scientist at Swarthmore, has in mind in his new book, "The Paradox of Choice" (Ecco; \$23.95). In his view, "unlimited choice" can "produce genuine suffering." Schwartz makes his case mostly through research in psychology and behavioral economics—research that shows how far real people are from the perfectly rational "utility maximizers" posited by classical economists.

In the real world, neither people nor firms maximize utility. Life is complicated, the options of the marketplace are numerous, and the human intellect is frail. As Herbert Simon, the 1978 Nobel laureate in economics, observed, any firm that tried to make decisions that would "maximize" its returns would bankrupt itself in a never-ending search for the best option. What firms do instead is "satisfice," to use Simon's term: they content themselves with results that are "good enough." Schwartz, who is a close reader of Simon, worries that the profusion of choices we face—a hundred varieties of bug spray, breakfast cereal, extra-virgin olive oil—is turning us into maximizers, and maximizers, he thinks, are prone to misery and depression.

Schwartz looks at the particular patterns of our irrationality, relying on the sort of research pioneered by two Israeli-American psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and the late Amos Tversky. It turns out, for instance, that people will often consciously choose against their own happiness. Tversky and a colleague once asked subjects whether they'd prefer to be making thirty-five thousand dollars a year while those around them were making thirty-eight thousand or thirty-three thousand while those around them were making thirty thousand. They answered, in effect, that it depends on what the meaning of the word "prefer" is. Sixty-two per cent said they'd be happier in the latter case, but eighty-four per cent said they'd choose the former.

Research in the wake of Kahneman and Tversky has unearthed a number of conundrums around choice. For one thing, choice can be "de-motivating." In

a study conducted several years ago, shoppers who were offered free samples of six different jams were more likely to buy one than shoppers who were offered free samples of twenty-four. This result seems irrational—surely you're more apt to find something you like from a range four times as large—but it can be replicated in a variety of contexts. Students who are offered six topics they can write about for extra credit, for instance, are more likely to write a paper than students who are offered thirty.

Why should this be? Schwartz suggests that it has to do with the irrational way people measure “opportunity costs.” Instead of calculating opportunity cost as the value of the single most attractive foregone alternative, we seem to assemble an idealistic composite of all the options foregone. A wider range of slightly inferior options, then, can make it harder to settle on one you're happy with. Similarly, when people direct their wants toward “classes” of goals, they tend to figure they'll get a better-than-average example of the class. When a person says, “I feel like a plate of spaghetti,” he envisions a particularly good plate of spaghetti. And, as the psychologists Daniel Gilbert, of Harvard, and Timothy Wilson, of the University of Virginia, have observed, “If it is difficult to know whether we will be happy fifteen minutes after eating a bite of spaghetti, it is all the more difficult to know whether we will be happy fifteen months after a divorce or fifteen years after a marriage.”

There are even cases, as Schwartz notes, where just one additional choice can produce outright paralysis. Tversky and the young Princeton psychologist Eldar Shafir asked experimental subjects how they would react to a desirable Sony appliance placed in a shopwindow, radically marked down. The offer met with predictable enthusiasm. When a second appliance, similarly marked down, was placed alongside the bargain Sony, enthusiasm—and sales—dropped. Some hypothetical customers were evidently frozen by indecision.

You might wonder how much these sorts of findings should really concern us. Even if there were some raging epi-

demic of buyer's remorse, strangers to the mall hardly need worry. But who is a stranger to the mall nowadays? Ours is a consumer culture that promises to liberate us to the extent that we can buy what we please; any evidence that we are poor choosers is a blow to its foundations.

Nor is the “paradox of choice” limited to the shopping aisle. It helps explain why so many people at age thirty are still flailing about, trying to choose a career—and why so many marriageable singles wind up alone. You await a spouse who combines the kindness of your mom, the wit of the smartest person you met in grad school, and the looks of someone you dated in 1983 (as she was in 1983) . . . and you wind up spending middle age by yourself, watching the Sports Channel at 2 A.M. in a studio apartment strewn with pizza boxes.

A central problem of choice is what Wilson and Gilbert call “miswanting.” Wanting, in their definition, is “a prediction of liking.” Predictions are often biased, and predictions of one's feelings are more biased than most. Current preferences “contaminate” future plans—so that, on weekly trips to the supermarket, customers who have just eaten tend to buy too little food, and hungry ones too much. You might try to draw on experience to help you choose, but your memories aren't to be trusted. As Kahneman has shown, our minds focus on the peak and the final moments of a past experience while crowding out memories of its duration.

Given that we're so bad at choosing what will make us happy, we seem to be faced with two options: mending the way we choose, or limiting our choices. Schwartz, in an effort to help us mend our ways, applies to individual shoppers Simon's distinction between maximizing and satisficing. A maximizer is someone who “can't be certain that she has found the best sweater unless she's looked at all the sweaters,”

Schwartz writes. “She can't know that she is getting the best price until she's checked out all the prices.” Instead, he says, one should become a satisficer, “content with the merely excellent as opposed to the absolute best.” It's not obvious that you can simply decide to convert from maximizing to satisficing. But Schwartz, though he distrusts American abundance, has a deeply American faith in our ability to refashion ourselves.

What about the other approach—trying to choose less? In some measure, we all do this, using a strategy that the Columbia social theorist Jon Elster calls “self-binding.” Like Ulysses lashing himself to the mast of his ship in order to prevent himself from succumbing to the Sirens' song, people make the choice of limiting their choices. Gilbert and Wilson note that there is one exception to the rule that hungry people overbuy and sated people underbuy at supermarkets: it's people who bring a grocery list, which the two psychologists call “a copy of *A Theory About What I Will Want in the Future*.” Strategies like this can be carried out at the level of society, by rules or social sanction, and surely help to explain Americans' extraordinary flight from addictive behavior in recent years—so sudden that it resembles a concert-hall panic. In 1965, even after the Surgeon General's report linking smoking to lung cancer, forty-two per cent of Americans smoked. Today, the figure has been cut roughly in half. Societal self-binding, rather than just new information, deserves much of the credit. (Or, if you like, the blame.)

Elster rightly insists that an individual's binding of himself is a very different kind of “pre-commitment” from lawmakers' binding of others—as different as resolution and coercion. But if choice is as painful as social scientists claim (Schwartz says it “tyrannizes” us)—and if miswanting is as prevalent—then a root-and-branch means of liberating us from it will always tempt policymakers and political thinkers. Some will advocate having others, perhaps the state, choose for people; for these advocates, behavioral economics provides a rationale for paternalism. The economist George Loewenstein, of Carnegie Mellon, has said



that anyone studying happiness was bound to end up leaning left. Indeed, miswanting can be seen as a version of Marxism's "false consciousness," only in a more alluring guise—no longer just an oratorical ruse to sidestep the expressed wishes of the working class but a hard datum of social science. In a recent law-review article, the Chicago legal and political theorist Cass Sunstein and the behavioral economist Richard H. Thaler elaborate on a doctrine they call "libertarian paternalism": "Libertarian paternalists," they write, "want to promote freedom of choice, but they need not seek to provide bad options, and among the set of reasonable ones, they need not argue that more is necessarily better."

All the abstract arguments against choice become harder to make when they are translated into concrete terms. When Schwartz notes that young Americans are unduly troubled by their choice of career, because they are "remarkably unconstrained by what their parents did before them," he sounds kindhearted and sincerely concerned. But he also sounds a bit like an English nob defending the class system while he sits in a leather armchair in Boodle's in about 1926. And if Schwartz's book is really about the anguish of choice in general—and not merely about choice as a facet of shopping—there is no reason for any such argument to stop before it reaches, say, "a woman's right to choose." Once you stop taking people's expressed preferences at face value, pretty much every single contentious political, economic, sexual, familial, social, and labor issue can be opened up to unpredictable renegotiation.

There are less disruptive remedies. Robert Reich, in his recent book "The Future of Success," notes that modern consumers, like corporations, respond to the marketplace by "outsourcing" choice. They hire experts—critics, in the old way of looking at things. While many experts, such as interior decorators, offer personalized service and charge a mint, the masses have access to choosing services that are essentially free. That, in effect, is what a "brand" is.

One function of certain New Economy innovations is to make choosing easier by automating it. TiVo, in theory,

allows television addicts to lose themselves in ever more programming choices, but it can also be used as a filter, a means of allowing viewers to dispense with choosing altogether. Internet grocery services, such as Peapod, allow shoppers to fill out a template that protects them from having to rechoose every week. In practical terms, the Peapod shopper is confronted with far fewer new brands and choices than was a suburban housewife pushing her cart down a grocery aisle during the Kennedy Administration.

It's also true that in a consumer society the most widespread of the misjudgments that humans bring to choice may also be a productive one. Researchers can tell us why someone can quickly become bored with a new Jaguar, or revert to thinking that life is meaningless two weeks after receiving a promotion he's sought for a decade. But the phenomenon—sometimes called the "hedonic treadmill"—can also explain why disaster, whether bankruptcy or incapacitation, seldom burdens our spirits for very long.

Strangely, we lose sight of our human resilience when we make big choices. People are consistently puzzled that so many things they had dreaded—from getting fired to being ditched by a spouse—"turned out for the best." Gilbert and Wilson even speculate (in a diplomatic way) that our inability to forecast this adaptive capacity spurs some people to a belief in God. "Because people are largely unaware that their internal dynamics promote such positive change," they write, "they look outward for an explanation." A tendency to overestimate the joy we'll get from buying baubles and winning honors is only half of a complex predisposition. The other half is our enormous capacity for happiness, even in the absence of such things. The surprise isn't how often we make bad choices; the surprise is how seldom they defeat us. ♦

CORRECTION OF THE WEEK

From the Times.

The Public Lives profile on Wednesday, about Michael Arad, an Israeli who is one of the designers of the "Reflecting Absence" memorial to be built at ground zero, misstated the location where he served in an infantry reconnaissance unit in the Israeli army. It was in the West Bank, not the Left Bank.

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