

The Paradox of Choice

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In the modern world, people are faced with decision after decision. Some are consequential, but many are trivial, and even when trivial, they take time and effort. From consumer purchases to investment decisions to college choices to romantic commitments to health care options, to career paths, decisions must be made in the face of plentiful but incomplete information and uncertain outcomes. Many of us, at or near retirement, may think that the days of big decisions are behind us. Not so! We face decisions about how to take advantage of our leisure time, about what to buy, how to invest, how to take care of our health, and about whether and when and where to move to a senior living facility. And beyond our own personal decisions, we may be noticing how much difficulty our children and grandchildren are having making decisions that are now in our rearview mirrors; where to go to college, how to choose a career, whether to change jobs, whether, and when, and who to marry, whether and when to have children. Our loved ones often seem to be suffering with uncertainty in the face of almost unlimited freedom to choose their futures.

It is a truism in the U.S., and most of the rest of the industrial, democratic world, that if there is one thing we can't have too much of, it's freedom of choice. We'll see in this course that whereas there is no doubt that choice is good, there can be too much of a good thing. And when there is, it leads to paralysis, to poor decisions, and to dissatisfaction with even good decisions. This has led to what, in 2005, I called *The Paradox of Choice*. This course is about the paradox of choice. If too much choice was a problem 20 years ago (it was!), it is a much bigger problem now. We'll see why. The course will bring the 20-year-old book up to date, and discuss some of the broad implications of the downside of freedom for how we organize our social and political life.

How the Class Will Operate

Sessions will be mostly lectures, but I urge you to participate by asking questions or making observations, some of which might provoke discussions among all of us. Since you are all experienced when it comes to making decisions, I hope and expect that you will bring your experiences with you to class, and offer views informed by your experience to enrich the conversation. The class has six major sections, and we will meet for six weeks. We will spend roughly a week on each major section, but the timing is only approximate. I'll alert you in class about when we are going to be moving on to the next section. Powerpoint slides will be posted within a few days of each class meeting. There is no required reading, but if you're going to read one book, it should be my *The Paradox of Choice*.

Recommended Reading

There has been an explosion of books written for popular audiences that covers material in this course. Here are some.

- Alpert, A. (2022). *The Good Enough Life*. Princeton.
Ansari, A. (2015) *Modern Romance*. Penguin.
Ariely, D. (2008). *Predictably Irrational*. Harper.
Gilbert, D. (2006). *Stumbling on Happiness*. Knopf.
Iyengar, S. (2010). *The Art of Choosing*. Twelve Books.
Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Schwartz, B. (2016). *The Paradox of Choice (Revised edition)*. Harpercollins.
Schneider, C. (1998). *The Practice of Autonomy*. Oxford.
Thaler, R. H. & Sunstein, C. R. (2008) *Nudge*. Yale.

Taking Initiative

Obviously, we have all had experience with choice, and I venture to say that we have all had experience with too much choice. I urge you to take the initiative to bring course-relevant material or personal experience to my attention. When you see an article in a newspaper or magazine or a web site that you think is relevant to material in the course, let me know, and/or send me a copy of the article. I will bring your submissions to everyone's attention when they seem to warrant being broadly shared. This is your chance to educate me and your classmates.

Class 1. Introduction: Freedom and Choice

- A. The “freedom and well-being “syllogism”
- B. Let's go shopping!
- C. Choice in other parts of life
 - 1. Healthcare
 - 2. Entertainment
 - 3. News/information
 - 4. Social engagements
 - 5. Romantic attachments
 - 6. Education
 - 7. Who to be
- D. Choice in the digital age

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Class 2. How We Choose

- A. Rational Choice Theory
 - 1. Why economists think that more choice is always better than less
- B. Assessing probability and value
- C. The challenge of comparison

- D. The goal of “maximizing”
- E. Maximizing vs. “satisficing”
 - 1. The Maximizing Scale
- F. Effects of maximizing
- G. Maximizing vs. satisficing in an uncertain world
- H. Effects of too much choice
 - 1. Paralysis
 - 2. Poor decisions
 - 3. Dissatisfaction with good decisions

Class 3. Choosing Who to Be

- A. Choice and the self
- B. Domains where it matters
 - 1. Shopping
 - 2. Eating
 - 3. Entertainment
 - 4. Politics
- C. Why “choice as a reflection of who you are” makes every decision a high-stakes decision.

Class 4. Why We Suffer

- A. Paralysis (FOMO)
- B. Bad decisions
- C. Dissatisfaction with good decisions
 - 1. Regret
 - 2. Missed opportunities
 - 3. Raised expectations
 - 4. Self blame
- D. Enhanced social comparison: What is the “best”?
- E. What to do about choice overload

Class 5. Too Much of a Good Thing

- A. Aristotle and the “mean”
- B. The “inverted U”
- C. Where we find the inverted U
- D. The inverted U and “tight” vs. “loose” cultures
- E. Social media, young people, unlimited choice, anxiety and depression
- F. The challenge of finding the “sweet spot”

Class 6. Choice and Culture: Revising Our Understanding of the Relation between Choice, Freedom, and Well-Being

- A. What counts as a decision?
- B. Choice overload in different cultures
- C. What “autonomy” means
- D. Habits and rules
- E. The virtues of “friction”
- F. Things to do about choice overload