

# The best doesn't exist. A psychologist explains why we can't stop searching.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz on the allure of a doomed mission.

[Rachel Sugar](#) Dec 12, 2018, 7:00am EST



*Shanée Benjamin for Vox*

Given that we live in a consumer culture where you can get anything — a T-shirt, fancy whiskey, blood pressure medication — delivered to your door within hours, it is surprisingly difficult to buy things.

Do you want jeans? What type of jeans do you want? Will those jeans look good on

you? Why didn't you buy jeans that look better? Also, isn't \$148 a lot to pay for jeans? Maybe they'll go on sale later. Maybe you'll find better jeans if you try harder. All you want is the best jeans, and is that so wrong?

Yes, psychologist Barry Schwartz famously argued in [\*The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less\*](#), his 2004 opus exploring why, if we love choices so much, an ever-growing number of them seems to be making us miserable.

According to him, the world is, very roughly, divided into two types of people: satisficers, who can be content with a good-enough thing — they're perfectly fine pants, let's move on with our brief lives — and maximizers, who can't call off the search until they're certain they're getting not just a good thing but the best.

I reached out to Schwartz, currently a visiting professor at the Haas School of Business at Berkeley, to try to understand what drives our collective hopeless quest for the best.

### **Why do we care so much about having “the best”?**

It's an interesting question ... and I don't have any clue about the answer. What my research has shown is that not everyone is after it. Some people want it, and some are satisfied with good enough. And it turns out that looking for the best can be extremely counterproductive, which is sort of what the point of the book was.

But why it is that some people want the best is a mystery. I have some speculations about it. Have you ever heard a parent say, “I only want what's good enough for my children?” No. When you're growing up and your parents are making decisions for you they are choosing the best, and kids watch their parents very closely. And then slowly, they start giving you a little bit of decision authority, and you do what you saw them do. They have essentially taught you that when it's up to you, only the best will do, and so you start trying to find the best.

Now, that suggests that you'll see more of this orientation in certain classes of people, right? Mostly the privileged class, whose professional, hovering parents are

the ones who most obviously are choosing the best on their behalf, [but] there's not any evidence that maximizing is especially prevalent among the privileged.

### **So what else might be going on?**

Choices are about making us feel good, or about getting us to some other thing that we want. But there's a third thing about choices that's mostly been ignored, and that is that the choices we make are statements to the world about who we are. And here, I think, there's an interesting interaction between the amount of choice people have and the standards they apply when making choices.

When all you could do was buy Lee's or Levi's, the jeans you bought were not a statement to the world about who you are because there wasn't enough variety in the jeans you bought to capture the variety of human selves.

There were only two kinds, so you couldn't make a statement, or much of a statement, in your choice of jeans. When there are 2,000 kinds of jeans, or 20,000 kinds of jeans, well, now all of a sudden it is a statement to the world about who you are because there's so much variety out there. Now we have evidence that when the choice sets are large, people are more inclined to say, "What I choose is saying something about who I am."

*"“You're not simply choosing an hour and a half of entertainment when you choose a movie, you're also telling the world something about who you are”"*

This is true of jeans. It's true of drinks. It's true of music videos. It's true of movies. When there are lots of options, all of a sudden, you're not simply choosing an hour and a half of entertainment when you choose a movie; you're also telling the world something about who you are.

That makes even trivial decisions seem important, and when that happens, people want the best. They may not care so much about how they spend two hours on a

Saturday night, but they really care about how they spend those two hours when it's essentially an identity badge. We've got a bunch of studies that show that large choice sets induce people to regard the choices they make as statements about the self, and that, in turn, induces them to raise their standards.

Now, this is not the only thing that makes choice identity relevant. Arguably, there isn't the kind of variety in cellphones that there is in jeans, but the cellphone has become such an iconic thing that even with relatively little variety, it means something about who you are that you have an iPhone or that you have the latest iteration of the iPhone.

So I don't want to suggest it's only about there being lots of options. Some things just seem to have identity implications wrapped up in them — maybe because of how they're marketed, or because of how central the items are to how we live our lives.

I mean, people really seem to care a lot more about their phones than just about anything else I can think of.

**People are either Apple people or Android people. It's not a phone; it's an identity.**

That's exactly right. I mean, I am an Android person, and I feel like I have to apologize when I take out my phone. "Listen, it doesn't mean I'm not cool." I feel like I have to justify making the uncool choice, even though it's the choice that, what, [80 percent of people](#) are making?

It may be specific to technology. Ten or 15 years ago, there was a study pitting capability versus usability in technology. The more capable a device is, the harder it is to use. No one has been able to figure out how to make devices that can do everything and simultaneously do the things we most care about simply. And when people are confronted with this trade-off, they invariably choose capability over usability.

That there's this sense that the new device will have capabilities that the old one didn't, and even if they never use any of those capabilities — even if they haven't been going through the world saying, “Oh, if only my phone did this, life would be perfect” — once the phone comes out, they want it, because maybe next week they'll decide that this new feature is just the thing that will turn their lives around.

You want the best — meaning the most capable, the cutting edge-est device, because who knows how you're going to use it next week, or next month?

**But the weird thing, to me, is that “the best” sounds really objective. There can be only one best.**

And that's nonsense. That's complete nonsense.

We have this sense that there is an objective best, and in virtually no area of life is that true. It's not even that, “Well, there's the best for me, and then there's the best for you.” It isn't even clear that there is a best for me. There's a whole set of things that are probably more or less equivalent.

We live in a culture where everything gets rated. Because of my profession, the most salient manifestation of this is the US News and World Report ratings of colleges and universities, which is probably as destructive an influence on college and universities as anything I can think of. It was preposterous at its inception, it has remained preposterous, and yet every school is doing everything it can do to move up that list. As if it made any sense to say that Harvard is “the best” university in the United States. Or Stanford, or Princeton.

There are really great universities, and there are less great universities. It isn't simply that Harvard may not be the best for me; it's not simply about subjectivity. It's that these are multidimensional, complicated things, and there is no one best.

If you have this mindset that says, “I have to get the best,” it's so hard to figure out what that is that you end up looking in panic around you at what other people are choosing as a way to help you figure out what is the best. We find that people who

are out to get the best do much more social comparison than other people.

I think it's partly because they are struggling to define the best, and they can't do it on their own, so they're madly checking out other people's decisions as a way of figuring out what really is the best. It's extremely destructive. Even when you've done that — you say, "Well, everyone seems to think Harvard's the best, so that's where I'm going to go" — it's not like you're confident that you've made the right decision. You're always second-guessing yourself, and doubting, and continuing to look around at what other people are doing. It's a pretty destructive illusion.

**I wonder if part of the desire for "the best" — meaning my desire for "the best" — comes from wanting to abdicate responsibility. Like, "Well, I did everything possible! It's the best! Whatever happens now isn't my fault." If I go to Harvard, well, whatever happens after that, at least I tried.**

You may be right about this. If you've actually gotten "the best," then what else could you do? The world has not cooperated. You have a disappointing result, and it's the world's fault, not yours, because you've done everything. But the paradox here is that it's people who are searching for the best who are anxious. People who are searching for good enough are not second-guessing themselves. When there's any little imperfection, people who are searching for the best don't say, "Well, the world has disappointed me." They say, "I must have made a mistake."

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People do make mistakes, but I do think that even if you're doing the best you can, it's an impossible task. But people think it's a possible task, so they end up blinding themselves. And let me just say, this is likely to be particularly acute in our culture, which is just thoroughly coated in notions of individual responsibility for everything. I think you won't find quite the same degree of self-blame in other

cultures as you will in the US.

### **How does that seep into our decision-making?**

If there are two kinds of jeans, and you buy a pair of jeans that don't fit you so well, you can say, "Well, what could I do? The world is not cooperating." If there are 200, and you buy a pair of jeans that don't fit you as well as you hoped, now it's hard to avoid blaming yourself. The paradox is that it may be that people strive for the best as a way convincing themselves that they have done all they can and they're off the hook. But that's not what results. You don't stop blaming yourself because you've managed to get your kid into Harvard if your kid drops out.

### **How do sites like Amazon and Yelp, where you can read an infinite number of reviews from anonymous strangers, shape our quest for the best?**

It seems to me that all it does is take the US News & World Report [strategy] and applies it to everything under the sun. It seems to matter not a whit that the people who are doing these rating may know absolutely nothing about the domain in question.

But the fact that you can always get a rating means that it should be easy to figure out what the best is, which means it should be easy to get the best. At least compared to the time in the past when we had less information. The combination of lots of options and lots of so-called information about option quality just makes it too tempting to raise your standards about everything — about what to buy, where to go, what hotel to stay in.

My wife and I have found when we look for an Airbnb in a place we haven't been before, we really depend on these ratings, because pictures don't tell you everything. In fact, they often are quite misleading. On the other hand, who are these people who are giving the ratings? So we read them with a jaundiced eye, sort of trying to read between the lines and know which ones to trust.

**What I'll do on Airbnb is I'll then read other reviews that those reviewers have**

written, so I know whether to trust them.

Oh, you really are compulsive.

**Sometimes I think it's fun! But then I realize I've been reading reviews of an \$8 spatula for hours, which is a terrible use of time.**

And there are people who do think it's fun in some domains. Often, when I give talks about choice, somebody will say, "Well, I love to buy a new car and I'm glad there are so many options and I get elbow-deep in the details." And I say, "Well, good for you. I'm glad you enjoy it. And do you also feel that way about household appliances? And do you feel that way about the clothes you wear? And do you feel that way about where you eat dinner?"

If it's discretionary, you know, "I'm gonna be this way about this, but not about these other things," then fine. But it tends not to be discretionary. It tends to be that if you're that kind of person, you're going to apply this to whatever decision you're making — often with regret and ruefulness.

**How much is the desire for the best just an attempt to avoid regret?**

I think it's huge. I think it's what produces paralysis. The only way to avoid regretting a decision is not making it, so I think a lot of the reason people don't pull the trigger is that they're so worried that when they do pull the trigger, they'll regret a choice they made.

*"The only way to avoid regretting a decision is not making it"*

I think people hate the idea that they will make a commitment and then be sorry they made it, even it's a trivial commitment. You know you eat 20 meals a week, so if you go to a bad restaurant, what's the big deal? You get to make up for it four hours later. Except people don't seem to act that way.

## Why don't we?

I don't know the answer, except that it seems like it's un-American to settle. And somehow that's true, no matter how trivial the decision is, no matter how many times you're going to repeat it, no matter how short-lived its consequences. "There are these people going to the trouble of making all these wonderful things and you're just gonna settle for something that's good enough? Shame on you." And that grabs hold of some people, or it grabs hold of all of us in some domains. It doesn't grab hold of everybody all the time. It's hard to resist.

**I keep thinking about all these startups that have really small collections — they only sell a couple of things, and they tend to be ... not cheap. And to me, the part of what makes it feel luxurious is that there's not a lot to choose from. It's curated. It's not like going to Target, where the choices are endless. And I'm wondering if there's a way in which lack of choice is becoming a luxury?**

It is a luxury in the sense that people who can afford to pay the premium and shop in boutiques are, in effect, hiring somebody to curate that choice for them. And it's going to cost you 15 percent more or 20 percent more, and you're willing to pay that to let somebody, essentially, clear out all of the debris so that you can pay attention to what needs to be paid attention to.

I'm not surprised at the attractiveness of that. I doubt you'd get very many people saying, "Well, I've been so overwhelmed by choice, I wanted to find a place where they made some of those choices for me, and I'm willing to pay a premium for that." But I'm guessing that's one of the things that makes this sort of thing attractive.

**So is there a way that good enough is actually the best?**

Yes, absolutely. And it's very hard to convince people that that's true. It's very hard to convince people that the way to maximize is by satisficing, but I think that's exactly right.