

## The Psychology of Choice: 5 Perspectives by Maria Popova

The psychology of spaghetti sauce and why too many jams make you lose your appetite. Why are you reading this? How did you decide to click the link, load the page and stay? How do we decide to do anything at all and, out of the myriad choices we face each day, what makes one option more preferable over another? This is one of the most fundamental questions of the social sciences, from consumer psychology to economic theory to behavioral science.

Today, at the risk of meta-irony, we look at not one but five fantastic books and talks that explore the subject. Take your pick(s) — if you can, that is.

### JONAH LEHRER HOW WE DECIDE

Among other things, Jonah Lehrer writes the excellent Frontal Cortex blog for Wired, one of our favorites. He is the Malcolm Gladwell of science writing — only with better hair and more meticulous fact-checking — distilling for the common man the complexities and fascinations of university labs and obscure research papers. In his latest book, *How We Decide*, Lehrer explores how the unexpected discoveries of neuroscience can help us make better everyday decisions.

Amazon has a nice Q&A with Lehrer on the book page, in which he addresses everything from neuroscience to how he handles the cereal aisle.

### BARRY SCHWARTZ THE PARADOX OF CHOICE

Barry Schwartz studies the relationship between economics and psychology. In *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, he debunks one of the great myths of modern civilization: That abundance makes us happier and greater choice equals greater good. Through solid behavioral economics, cognitive psychology and neuroscience, Schwartz makes a compelling case that abundance exhausts the human psyche, sprouts unreasonable expectations and ultimately makes us feel unfulfilled. Alongside the research, he offers simple yet effective strategies for curbing the disappointment consumerism has set us up for and living lives that feel more complete.

### MALCOLM GLADWELL BLINK

We may have had our public disagreements with the king of pop psychology, but Malcolm Gladwell does have a penchant for synthesizing diverse research, connecting the dots, and distilling the gist for the laymen of the land. In *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, he does just that, translating research on snap judgements into captivating storytelling about our “adaptive unconscious” — the always-on mental system the processes danger and reacts to new information. From assessing a stranger’s trustworthiness to choosing a mate during speed-dating to orchestrating military maneuvers, the book explores the deeper science of what’s commonly known as “first impressions,” kindling a new level of awareness of our own behavior and that of others.

#### DAN ARIELY PREDICTABLY IRRATIONAL

Behavioral economist Dan Ariely has dedicated his career to exploring the curious ways in which people make choices through odd, unorthodox and often amusing experiments. *Predictably Irrational, Revised and Expanded Edition: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* is a densely insightful yet entertaining read, recounting Ariely's ingenious experiments in how irrational impulses drive our economic behavior and substantiating them with additional evidence for what we all suspect but don't want to hear: We're emotional beings swayed by the winds of irrationality even as we attempt to make the most logical and rational of choices. Intelligent and accessible, the book will change the way you think of yourself and the world around you.

The book's sequel, *The Upside of Irrationality*, is also a fascinating read and highly recommended.

#### SHEENA IYENGAR THE ART OF CHOOSING

Columbia Business School social psychologist Sheena Iyengar. *The Art of Choosing* begins with the story of a man who survived stranded in the middle of the ocean for 76 days because he chose to live, just as Iyengar herself has chosen not to let her blindness prevent her from being a fierce researcher and acclaimed academic. This fascinating piece of pop-psychology offers a fascinating journey into the web of consumerism, woven out of our biological need for choice and control, drawing on everything from the pensées of Albert Camus to *The Matrix*.

In this compelling BigThink interview, Iyengar reveals how she came to study choice and how her own biological limits affect the way she makes choices.