

'Choosing' will enlighten those who cannot decide

What is freedom? Freedom is the right to choose: the right to create for oneself the alternatives of choice. Without the possibility of choice, a man is not a man but a member, an instrument, a thing."

This quote by Archibald MacLeish, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, begins "The Art of Choosing," the new book by Sheena Iyengar, a professor at the Columbia Business School.

"We make choices and are in turn made by them. In other words, choosing helps us create our lives," Iyengar writes. "The ability to choose well seems to depend in no small part upon our knowing our own minds."

Iyengar has undergraduate degrees in economics and psychology from the University of Pennsylvania and a doctorate in social psychology from Stanford University. She is widely considered one of the leading authorities on choice theory; her work is extensively cited by other researchers. And even though Iyengar is a seasoned academic, "The Art of Choosing" is readily accessible by anyone who has minimal exposure to the areas covered in her book.

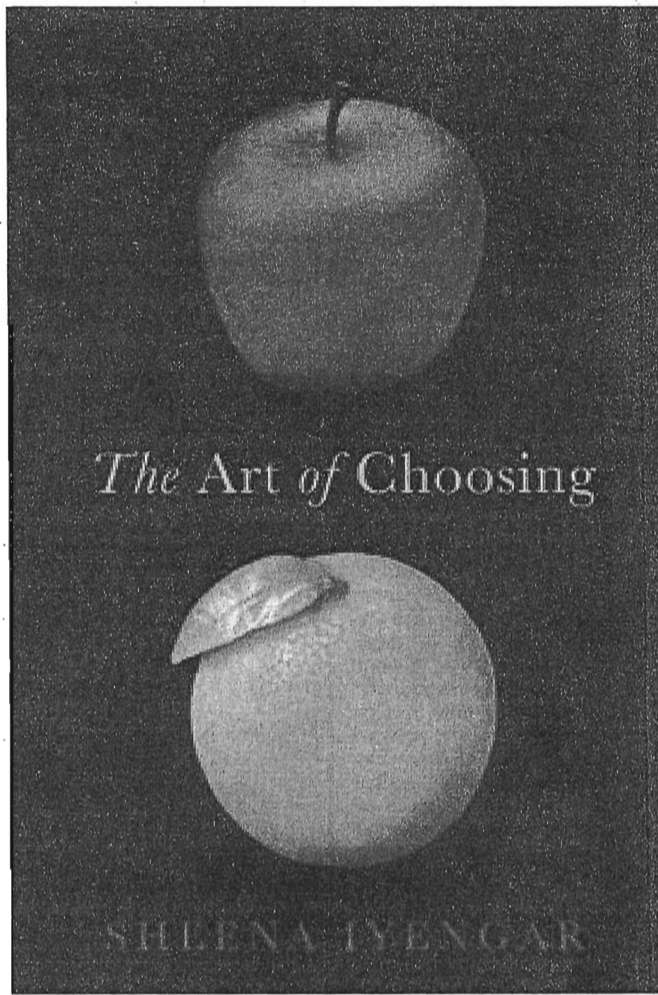
The author sees the drive to choose as being fundamental to human nature. This rings true to experience and helps to explain how different political systems have developed and evolved over time. It certainly contributes to our understanding of why democratic forms of government tend to be ultimately more successful than those that are more totalitarian in nature.

"When given the freedom to choose for themselves, the social structures that people from other parts of the world create closely resemble the Western model," Iyengar observes. "When people aren't motivated to challenge threats to freedom, what's to stop them from acquiescing to totalitarianism?"

It is almost a truism that people like to feel that they are in control of their destiny. The idea that we are personally in charge of the direction of our lives is more important than the reality that lies behind our actual circumstance. Without choice—or at least the perception that one has the ability to choose among various alternatives—it is very difficult to sustain motivation.

When individuals come to the conclusion that they do not have control over their personal affairs; they tend to experience heightened anxiety and stress, which can have a negative impact on overall health and well-being.

In chapter one, "The Call of the



"The Art of Choosing," by Sheena Iyengar. New York: Twelve, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing, 2010. 329 pages, \$25.99.

Wild," Iyengar describes the results of a long-term research project known as the Whitewall Studies, conducted by Michael Marmot of the University of London. Marmot's team followed a group of 10,000 civil servants in Great Britain beginning in 1967. They tracked these individuals for decades, comparing levels of compensation to general health.

"What affected people's health most in these studies wasn't the actual level of control that people had in their jobs, but the amount of control they perceived themselves as having," Iyengar reports. "A well-compensated executive who feels helpless will suffer the same type of negative physiological response as a low-paid mailroom clerk.

"The less control people had over their work, the higher their blood pressure during work hours," Iyengar continues. "People with little control over their work also experienced more back pain, missed more days of work due to illness in general, and had higher rates of mental illness."

In chapter six, "Lord of the

Things," the author discusses the other end of the spectrum—choice overload:

"When the options are few, we can be happy with what we choose since we are confident that it is the best possible choice for us," Iyengar writes. "When the options are practically infinite, though, we believe that the perfect choice for us must be out there somewhere and that it's our responsibility to find it."

"It's clear that, after a certain point, the amount of time and energy directed toward choosing counteracts the benefits of the choice," she adds. "A focus on simply increasing the available choices can lead to decisions that harm rather than help. It was well known even in ancient Greece that we act against our better judgment with disturbing regularity."

Human beings tend to associate having more options as intrinsically leading to a more beneficial outcome—even when the evidence suggests otherwise.

"One of the areas in which we greatly desire choice is health care, and we dislike having restrictions

imposed," Iyengar observes. "Health Maintenance Organizations do, indeed, offer fewer choices, but does that necessarily lead to inferior health care?"

The truth seems to be that most of us would rather decide what we want on our hamburger than be given a steak without being provided with the same input regarding how it is prepared.

Toward the end of the book, Iyengar offers a number of strategies designed to improve the quality of our decision-making processes. "Science can assist us in becoming more skillful choosers, but at its core, choice remains an art."

So if you are one of those who has a difficult time deciding what to do, you might find "The Art of Choosing" to be a particularly enlightening resource. You just have to make the choice to buy it.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.